

bernice summerfield™

NEW
WORLDS 

OLD FRIENDS



jonathan clements,
marc platt and
pete kempshall

BIG
FINISH



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A novella collection
written by
Jonathan Clements
Marc Platt &
Pete Kempshall

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OLD FRIENDS

A collection of novellas written by Jonathan Clements, Marc Platt, and Pete Kempshall

Late 2562. Bernice Summerfield is 22 and en route to the ruin of Earth. She's young, she's single, she's just got an MA in archaeology. There's a life of adventure in front of her.

And then she meets the half-human, half-lemur Ivo, whose life she'll completely knock sideways.

Late 2607. Professor Bernice Summerfield is... well, she looks nearly 40, but it's difficult to tell what with all the time travel. She's on her way to a funeral, and to meet up with people she's not seen since her 20s.

Ex-husband / current-beau Jason is keen to go with her. Benny never talks about that period of her life – what she did to keep out of the war, where she travelled, how she survived or who it was broke her heart. She's run through all time and space to avoid this reunion. But the best-selling author of *Down Among The Dead Men* must finally uncover her own past.

Published by
Big Finish Productions Ltd.
PO Box 1127
Maidenhead
SL63LW

www.bigfinish.com

Range Editor: Simon Guerrier
Project Editor: Ian Farrington
Managing Editor: Jason Haigh-Ellery

Bernice Summerfield was created by Paul Cornell
Jason Kane was created by Dave Stone

ISBN 1-84435-242-0

Cover art by Lee Sullivan © 2006
New Worlds design by Stuart Manning
Logo designed by Simon Holub

First published November 2006
Cheating the Reaper © Jonathan Clements
The Ship of Painted Shadows © Marc Platt
The Soul's Prism © Pete Kempshall

Thanks to Sharon Gosling and Steve Tribe

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddies Ltd

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WELCOME TO THE BRAXIATEL COLLECTION

Located on the planetoid KS-159, our collection of everything is open to students and academics from all over the cosmos. It's perfectly safe, honest.

You probably know **Bernice Summerfield** from her recent tri-D appearances and publications. She's our Professor of Archaeology (and, unofficially, of Weird Adventures). You'll soon see her half-Killoran son, **Peter**, running about the place. His all-Killoran dad, **Adrian Wall**, is our construction manager. He and Benny aren't an item though. Current gossip is that Adrian's seeing **Bev Tarrant** – who's in charge of the Collection while, er, our founder is, ahem, on leave. Some say Bev used to be an art thief, but pay no attention to rumour. **Jason Kane** is Benny's current beau – they even used to be married. **Joseph** is Benny's personal assistant and our most senior AI, linked to the Collection's main systems. **Hass** is the Collection's gardener, who you'll see lumbering amongst the hedgerows in his pressure suit.

Keep to the paths. Don't abuse the drones.

We hope you survive your stay.

Cheating the Reaper

Jonathan Clements

Benny decided to sit in one of the quieter gardens. She didn't know at first what drew her to it. There was something faintly soothing about the distant whooshes of pistons as Hass weeded around the rose bushes. There was something about the familiarity of the hedges and the flower beds, something homely that made her feel centred. And then, of course, there was that little patch she'd dug herself, where her cat was buried. She decided not to mention it to Jason, because he would only make some crack about her and furry pets.

She remembered a time, long ago, the first time she'd had her heart broken, when she had sat in a garden like this. Some idiot had let her down and, even when she got back to civilisation, she'd been a little beaten up about it. Her aunt – come to think of it she wasn't a real aunt – had had her round for tea, and left her in the garden while she fiddled with the sandwiches, and Benny remembered thinking that all that work, all that weeding and digging and planting over many years, had all been for something. Because her aunt had made the garden just so, so that she could sit in it and be at peace, regardless of what bastards men were. There was, on this day, something of that long-forgotten garden, now doubtless overgrown and neglected, in the grounds at the Collection. Good old Hass. Did he even realise how good he made people feel by just looking after the flowers and making it possible to sit here and... do nothing.

Her son, Peter, ran through the trees, tantalisingly in and out of eyeshot. Blue furry limbs, gangling from outside stripy T-shirt and shorts. He growled and scratched at imaginary foes, lost in a world of his own.

'He thinks he can run around like that forever,' said Benny, as Jason sat beside her.

'We all do,' said Jason.

Benny regarded her sometime husband for a moment.

'Until...' she said. 'Until that day when the bus doesn't *just miss you* at all.'

'Sorry?'

'I'm dead in a million parallel universes. I tripped and banged my head on Westminster Bridge. I didn't catch myself before I fell off Huashan. You never fished me out of the swimming pool on Pinert.'

'Are you about to have a go at me, because if this is something you're going to get leery about, I ought to say that's all down to alternative Jasons in alternative universes,' said Jason.

Benny shook her head.

'I just mean, we're alive and then we're dead.' She looked down at

the picture of Ivo. 'One minute, doing whatever it was that ageing demi-lemurs did, and then falling to his death thanks to a faraway world's inability to have proper fencing on mountain paths. No drama, no scandal, just a stupid, mundane ending of a life.'

'Could be worse,' said Jason. 'There's an alternative universe where he dies a long, lingering death...'

Benny wondered if that was the thought that went through Ivo's mind as his foot slipped and he plummeted towards the ground. If it had been her, she betted it would have been something much less existential. Probably a rude word and some hopeful thoughts about Keanu Reeves with angel's wings.

'Benny,' said Jason, as carefully as was possible for him. 'I'm sorry really, to hear about him.'

'But you don't care, though.'

'That's not fair. I didn't know him. You've never once even mentioned this guy.'

'That doesn't mean I don't miss him now he's gone.'

'And that doesn't mean I don't care that you're unhappy.'

'Yes,' she said, realising. 'That's all that this means to you, isn't it? It doesn't really affect you, does it?'

Jason shrugged. He could see that Benny was still clutching the black-rimmed holo of the dead demi-lemur.

'War and invasions aside, the odd accident,' continued Benny. 'But you don't see people getting older.'

'I'll have you know,' said Jason, 'that everyone I ever knew, and everyone I'd ever heard of, were all dead three hundred years ago.'

'That doesn't count,' said Benny. 'I've done that. I've been there. First time you're off somewhere in the far future, and there's this big... this big...'

'Shock?'

'Yeah, this big shock. And you say to yourself, blimey! That's it. They're all dead. Dad. Mum. The Kinsect who stole my dolly as a child, and the first boy I ever kissed, and the first bastard to ever dump me. That heartless, spineless git who sold me out to the Academy. And wotsername, my first teacher, Miss Kills With a Stare.'

'What kind of name is that?' asked Jason.

'She was Mantabrian. Big orange thing. And they're all dead. And you feel a bit sad and mopey about it.'

'I didn't,' said Jason. 'I didn't think that at all. The first thing I thought was, wahey! I'm still here! It's ad 30,000 and JK's still got it!'

'Yes,' said Benny, stroking the edges of the black-rimmed holo.

'That's the second thing I thought. I'm still here. I'm still here, and maybe I'm dead already somewhere back down the timeline, or maybe I'll settle down even further into the future. But I know I'm here.'

‘And you can go back.’

‘Exactly,’ she said. ‘I mean, we can’t now. But we could, in theory. At some point, given the right friends, given the right situation, we could pop back to 1996 and see all your loser mates. Or the end of time and be all smug about it. Or see Ivo FitzIndri.’

‘Somewhere he’s still alive?’ asked Jason.

‘Yeah, two years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago, he was off doing his monk-y thing –’

‘You said he was a demi-lemur.’

‘He was a monk. A demi-lemur monk. And I remember him being alive. And we didn’t know each other for very long, but... you know when you know someone could be a friend?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Jason. ‘I knew this girl called Janet O’Shea, and we never talked a whole lot, but the last time I saw h–’

‘No,’ Benny frowned. ‘This isn’t some girl you almost got off with. This is something deeper than that.’

‘Well, excuse me!’ Jason wasn’t sure it was about that at all. In his experience, most school-day nostalgia was precisely as deep as that – who you nearly got off with.

‘He saved my life. He actually *saved* my life.’

‘I’ve done that, too.’

‘Yes, Jason. Yes. And you’re still alive. And isn’t it great that I can tell you how pleased I am about it? Isn’t it great I can say I love you for it, despite all your... many faults.’

‘I sense a compliment buried somewhere in the middle of all that.’

‘It’s just...’ said Benny, getting to her feet and turning to face Jason, as if he were an audience and she the orator, just like she’d been reading about recently. She knew they didn’t have time for this, that Bev had given them a mission. She knew that was why Jason was here, to chivvy her back to work. But she couldn’t think of Ancient Greece now, not with her own dead past reaching out to her. ‘It’s just that I don’t want to be the type of dippy soul who turns up at a funeral and moans about all the things she should have said. I want to say them now.’

‘Be my guest,’ said Jason, settling back on the bench.

‘Not to you, stupid! To everyone.’

‘To everyone except me?’

‘No! Just everyone in general.’ Benny knew that Jason enjoyed such argumentative reversals, but it was just irritating her. She peered anxiously after her son, but Peter was quite safe. He had found a hose and turned it on Hass, who, safely beneath the armour of his environment suit, was paying a jet of water no more heed than he might a small meteor storm or a salvo of machine-gun fire.

‘Ivo is dead,’ said Benny. ‘Some sweet little creature I knew for a

couple of days is dead. And he had a whole life I never knew about.'

'Well, you could find out,' said Jason, not really seeing where this was going.

'But it's too late. I don't know if he settled down with some lady lemur. Or came out of the closet and went lemur clubbing. You know, – we never had him round for a barbecue.'

'We haven't got a barbecue.'

'But if we had one, we never had him round.'

'You hate barbecues. You said it was the unfashionable in pursuit of the indigestible.'

'Just a few friends round, you know. To chat about stuff and coo at baby pictures and catch up on old times.'

There were times when Jason was forced to admit it; regardless of all his expertise on alien biology, on the desires and intimate habits of so many races, the greatest mystery of all was the working of the human female mind.

'What,' he said with some trepidation, 'on Earth are you on?'

'Old friends!' Benny suddenly blurted the words, as if they had been fighting to escape from her all along.

'I haven't got any old friends!' she added, by way of clarification.

'There's me!' countered Jason. There's me and Adrian and Hass and Joseph. You even seem to be getting on with Bev these days. You're just feeling low. And, I might add, a bit uncharitable towards a large number of people who think you are fantastic.'

Benny paced swiftly back and forward in front of the bench, wringing her hands.

'No, no, I mean old friends.'

She turned to face Jason, her look imploring him to understand.

'I was Away. Not just on some foreign exchange trip or out on a spiral arm. I was Away, and you know it. I was gone. I mean, it's not like there's anyone I really, truly miss from my younger days, but how am I ever to know?'

'Oh, I get it,' said Jason. This is about not being there at all.'

'Right! I wasn't there. I was gone, bang! Out of time, missing completely from the records. I had my twenties, and all the adventure and the setting of roots, and the making of acquaintances, and then...'

'Poof!'

'I prefer *bang*, really. But yes, poof! I'm gone.... I'm gone. And people are saying, I don't know: *That Benny's a surly cow. That's three years she hasn't sent us a Christmas card. And: Okay I'll give her one more call, and if she doesn't come down the pub, then she obviously hates me.*'

'You don't know that,' said Jason.

'But I can blooming well guess,' she said. You'll find my name, I bet you, on some academic server. Never replies to emails. Never came to

the conference. Never delivered her paper.'

'Yes,' said Jason, placing a gentle, admonitory hand on her shoulder. 'But that happens to everyone. We all lose touch with people.'

'It's not about losing touch.'

'Yes it is.'

'No, it isn't. It's about never being in touch at all. I wanted to go to weddings. I wanted to be someone's godmother.'

'It sounds,' said Jason, 'utterly, utterly ghastly.'

Despite herself, Benny giggled.

'You're doing great,' said Jason. 'You have tons of friends. You know loads of people. I've never seen you send a Christmas card anyway, you're too disorganised.'

'I suppose so. But it's like the life I had when I was young. It's like it's all gone. They must be old people by now.'

'Welcome to everyone else's world,' said Jason. 'Is this going to turn into a rant about some kid you wish you'd stayed in touch with from school?'

'No,' said Benny. She looked down at the notice of Ivo's funeral.

'But,' she added, 'I still feel like something is lost. I mean, Ivo. Okay, I can't help him now, he's dead, he's gone. But I can't even go to his funeral.'

'Why not?' asked Jason. 'Let's do it. He saved your life, after all. Let's say thanks and have a knees-up. Me, I like funerals.'

'You're just weird. And it's a nice thought, but look.' She held up the card for him to see. 'It's three whole days away, and it's clear on the other side of the sector.'

Jason peered intently at the picture of the demi-lemur and the details on the card.

'So send flowers,' he said.

For a moment, Benny entertained the idea. But then the harsh realities came home to her. A signal at the speed of light to the way-station at Ahmadabad. A sublight message pod making at least three jumps, over the weekend.

Then reaching some unknown florist on a world she'd never been to before; it wasn't going to happen.

'Nope,' she said. 'We'll be lucky if a telegram gets there in time.'

'Gets where?' said Jason, his voice rising, as if he was waiting for an answer he already knew. He held up the card for her to see.

'Er... Balgoris,' said Benny. 'Not a chance. Too far.'

Jason waited patiently, leaning back in the seat, examining his fingernails with exaggerated interest.

'Am I missing something?' asked Benny, after a time.

'Yes,' said Jason.

There was something, Benny was forced to admit, ineffably cool about it all. For years and years, she had grown used to the dull herding of civilian spaceports and harbours, the checking and re-checking of documentation; the stamping of visas and strange encounters with people who wanted to feel her arms and legs.

There was none of that when one was a guest of the military. She barely had time to pack her stuff and get Peter a sitter before the dropship was screaming out of the sky into the nearest available scrap of land – in this case, the garden. Benny and Jason waited expectantly, their backpacks lolling from their shoulders, until it became apparent that the matt-black metal spider wasn't even going to turn its engines off. Despite all her previous experience with soldiery, there was still some genteel element within Benny's character that expected marching bands and red dress uniforms, clicked heels and drawing-room officer courtesy. Spoilt by being brought up the daughter of a high-ranking officer. She had, she supposed, rather expected the pilots to come in for a cup of tea.

She couldn't even see them. There were no windows on the dropship, just the silvery glow of insignia and callsign digits, pulsing faintly in the Collection's dusk, ready to be turned off, going black-on-black. Stealthy.

The engine noise was deafening. No dampers required here. Half of the military's job was PR, turning up like this and scaring the beejesus out of the locals, all the more to say: This is what we can do.

Don't make us do it to you. The engines thrummed through the walls and ground of the Collection, such that Benny suddenly began to develop a heretofore unknown concern for Rodney Cleveland's precarious collection of Qing vases.

We'd better get a move on, mouthed Jason. He was actually yelling it at the top of his voice, although Benny couldn't hear a word. The garden was getting distinctly tropical with all the heat, as giant turbines towards the back of the spider pumped out small hurricanes of their own.

Jason patted Benny gently on the behind, urging her to get a move on before Rodney Cleveland's nearby exhibit had a china crisis, or Hass lost it about the condition of the roses.

Benny jogged towards the dropship, the hot exhausts ruining her hairdo. By the time she made it to the ramp, one hairclip was dangling by her left ear, flicking in the artificial wind and smacking her in the face. She kept her head down and sprinted up the ramp, almost tripping as the rush of air suddenly ceased. She caught sight of a big

man in fatigues, but only really noticed him as his big hand grasped her shoulder firmly and all but threw her further into the ship.

Jason was mere seconds behind her, proffering a hand in greeting to the soldier, who ignored it completely, and shoved Jason after Benny.

‘All in!’ he yelled forward to the pilots. ‘Wheels up!’

Benny had the merest fraction of time to speculate that there weren’t actually any wheels before the dropship jerked free of the ground, the ramp still slamming shut, as anti-gravity slid in and the spidery craft fell upwards.

‘Strap yourselves in!’ shouted the soldier. Now Benny had a better look at him, he was barely out of his teens. *They’re getting younger, she thought. Soldiers and policemen.*

The seats were firm and functional, the floor unadorned black metal with nobbly bits. Benny fumbled with the webbing of her seatbelt as the dropship lurched to one side, powering further away from the gravity well of the Collection. Her errant hairclip banged hard against her cheek on its hinge of hair, and she suddenly felt bloated and fat.

G-force! Benny thought with a smirk. How’s that for old-fashioned?

She was having trouble with her seatbelt. It wouldn’t go round her.

Some midget had been in the seat before her, how annoying. But no matter how hard she tugged, the clip would not come further out.

Then Jason was wrenching her back out of her seat, tugging off the backpack she’d forgotten all about, throwing it to the youthful soldier, who shoved it unceremoniously into a locker. Benny wondered for a moment about the condition of her face cream, which came in a posh glass bottle, and now could well be seeping through fragments all over her posh black dress.

Jason shoved her back in her seat, buckling the clip in front of her.

Benny suppressed a chuckle, half expecting the baby-faced soldier to start an in-flight demonstration of life-jackets and environment suits, but he was clipping himself into his own seat without further thought for the passengers.

There was a crackle of static from a speaker overhead. Baby-face turned back to Benny and Jason and made a gesture she didn’t recognise, pointing up, his fingers in an ‘L’-shape, his wrist rotating.

Thanks, thought Benny. *That’s a great help, sign-language boy. Bloody military.*

‘Capture in twenty,’ said the pilot’s disembodied voice. ‘All personnel strap in, lock rests, and shut up!’

It was coming back to her now. Benny reached up to the headrest on either side of her head, and pulled round the headrest wings so that they locked her head in place. Jason frowned in mock-puzzlement, loving the brutish manliness of it all, the threat of danger and the thrill of facing it with so many safety measures. He reached

up and locked his own headrest.

‘All right,’ said Jason, his voice bellowing a little to counter the engines. ‘I’ve strapped in and I’ve locked the wotsits!’

‘Now shut up!’ said Benny through gritted teeth, staring straight ahead.

‘Why?’ said Jason. It’s not like the pilot can hear me.’

‘It’s not for his benefit,’ hissed Benny. ‘It’s so you don’t bite off your own sodding tongue.’

‘Righto then!’ said Jason through exaggeratedly clamped teeth. ‘I’d getter stog galking!’

‘In five!’ said the pilot’s voice. ‘In four. In three. In two.’

The engines went dead silent and, for a second, Benny thought she could feel her hairclip drifting away from her cheek, drifting off on its own little voyage of discovery, tugging her hair with it as it floated, momentarily weightless.

The entire dropship jolted as it smacked into something much larger, great clamps attaching to the hull with all the delicacy of a sledgehammer.

‘Glimey,’ said Jason, his teeth still dutifully gritted. Benny was briefly disappointed that her locked headrest did not permit her to shoot him a withering stare. A dropship like this could take a direct hit from a low-thirties missile, so a clamp on a Clothes Horse wasn’t going to bother it much.

Baby-face the Sign-language Soldier Boy flashed two fingers at Benny without turning in his seat, a gesture that she took to mean two minutes of waiting, rather than an insult.

So she waited, with nothing to see but the back of the seat in front of her. She fiddled idly with her hairclip, jamming it back into place somewhere at the top of her head, and fully aware that it probably made her look like an idiot. She stared ahead at the grim, dark, functional interior of the dropship, and couldn’t help but admit that it was an old friend in and of itself.

She made a mental note to Jason, to tell him that old memories, even bad ones or unpleasant ones, even ones tinged with the stain of failure and betrayal, were still memories. Like a song, she thought, like a song that comes on the radio that leads you to think of happy memories, even though unhelpful husbands remind you that you hated it when it was new.

This all seemed a bit full-on – the military transport and the accelerated passage, but she fixed her thoughts on the money it would save. Then, sheepishly, she thought of Ivo, and serendipity.

And when all was said and done, it was the right thing to do.

There was no way that a telegram, let alone a human being, was going to make it to Balgoris in time for Ivo’s funeral. Half the point of

locating the Collection on, or for that matter, in planetoid KS-159, was that it was out of the way – a boon for avoiding political entanglements, at least until recently. It wasn't even like there weren't flights right into the Collection either, and even if you were travelling on an off-day, it was possible to get a hopper from the next system over. But when you were really in a hurry, nothing beat the military for getting you somewhere fast.

They had asked the Collection for an expert to visit Balgoris some months ago, even mentioned Benny by name. Jason had apparently intercepted the message and stalled them, said she was tied up in things. Which she was, as it happened – still in the hands of the Crossscape.

Now he had done a deal: Benny would go for a looksee, sign off whatever they wanted on this dig. And they'd get her to Balgoris in time for the funeral. Seemed pretty reasonable, really.

A light on the bulkhead in front of her flashed momentarily from green to red and back again, and Benny had the faintest sensation of disorientation. Then there was the thunk of the clamps outside the hull, and the faintest murmur of the engines.

'All done!' said Baby-face, unstrapping himself and pushing back his headrest locks.

'Hi, I'm Conner.'

Benny and Jason smiled uneasy hellos.

It's okay,' said Conner. 'You can get up and walk around. We'll be there in about two hours.'

'Can I stog gritting my geeth now?' said Jason.

'Oh, Jason, don't be a cretin,' said Benny. Baby-face Conner, however, seemed to have a sense of humour bypass.

'Yes sir, Mr Kane. The regs are only in case of trouble with the docking. We're undocked now, so there's nothing to run into us.'

'So we're on our way?' asked Jason.

'Er... yes sir. We're almost there.'

'Never ridden the Clothes Horse?' said a voice from behind Conner.

A man in the super-dark grey of a pilot's uniform was standing there, his voice matching that which had boomed out over the intercom. He was tall enough to be bowed slightly by the confines of the dropship, white hair poking from beneath the cloth padding of an underhelmet, and the dark plastic of an upfolded microphone seeming to elongate his eyebrow in the half light.

'Lady and gentleman,' he said with suave wink. This is your captain speaking.'

Benny simpered obligingly.

'We've declamped from the Clothes Horse. We're already in the Balgoris home system. I've taken the liberty of double-timing it so you

arrive early.'

'I'm sorry, what?' said Jason.

The captain fiddled with a lever somewhere in the chair in front, allowing it to spin so he could sit facing them. Conner wandered back up towards the cockpit, leaving them alone.

'You people left it really late,' said the captain, matter-of-factly. He spoke to Benny as if her companion wasn't there. Oh, who can blame him? thought Benny, but felt she really ought to include Jason.

'You were right, Jason,' she said. 'It was possible for the military to get us to Balgoris in time, but even they would have had trouble.'

'Yes,' said the captain. 'Luckily for you there was a Clothes Horse coming through.'

'Think of it as a giant warp engine,' said Benny, earnestly. 'With little clippie things all round the side. Great for moving a hundred troop transports into the middle of someone's system.'

'That's right, Professor Summerfield,' said the captain. 'We just clamped on and punched a hole right through into another universe,' he grinned smugly, since this presumably was a great way of impressing girls. Benny continued to smile like an idiot, resisting the temptation to tell him to cut it out. Jason looked at her with the beginnings of a scowl.

'In a way, we've actually travelled in time added the captain in a hushed whisper, as if expecting applause.

'Oh,' said Jason. 'Right. Blimey.'

'The Clothes Horse is doing a rim circuit at the moment,' said the pilot. 'Looks like the brass made sure it spent twenty minutes near KS-159. You were lucky we caught you in time. There would have been a week's wait for it to come through next time.'

'So, the travelling in time thing...?' asked Jason.

'Yes,' said the captain. 'Don't worry, you won't experience any ill effects. Technically, we've arrived here about five hours before you left the Collection. But by the time you could get back to tell yourself that, it'll already be tomorrow'

'Naughty,' said Benny, flirtily, as she only realised afterwards.

'Well, it can be,' grinned the pilot. 'Nothing says victory more like turning up ten minutes ahead of a declaration of hostilities.'

'Isn't that illegal?' asked Jason, pointedly.

'So's killing people,' said Benny without thinking. 'And the navy do that all the time!' She put her hand to her mouth in surprise, realising that a rebuke to Jason had just inadvertently insulted the whole ship.

'Oh, I'm sorry, captain!' she said. 'That must have sounded awfully ungrateful and silly. Typical me!'

The captain, however, laughed.

'You haven't changed a bit,' he chuckled.

'I... er... haven't?'

'Although,' added the captain. 'I see that you have no idea who I am.'

'I'm sorry,' said Benny, seeing a whole raft of faux pas drifting ever closer. 'I'm an awful person with faces, and it's been such a busy week, and blimey, all that business with the exhausts has put my hair in a tizz and my brain with it –'

'Benny,' said the captain quietly. 'It's me. Dave Vyshinsky.'

'Er...' Benny looked in vain to Jason for help, but he had already considered himself excluded, and was peering stiffly at his copy of *The Gwen an Enigma*.

Somewhere deep in the recesses of her mind, past a series of walls she'd built up, and parties that had done for big sections of brain cells, past a life most extraordinary, she sensed a name that she hadn't spoken for a lifetime.

'Vicious!' she cried.

'Stunner!' he replied, making an imaginary pistol with his fingers and shooting at her playfully.

'Oh!' said Benny. 'Jason! Jason!'

Jason allowed one eye to stop pretending to squint at his book in the half-light.

'What?' he said.

'This is Vicious Vyshinsky!' said Benny. 'We were cadets together!'

'Fancy that,' said Jason, in such a manner as to imply he did not fancy it at all.

Benny had seen plenty of cockpits in her time, but she played along.

Dave Vyshinsky was obviously quite used to pointing out where all the joysticks were to adoring females, but she did her best to make it clear where things stood.

'Sorry if my husband seems a little cranky,' she said to Vyshinsky, as they teetered along the walkway towards the cockpit.

'That's okay,' said Vyshinsky. 'From what I hear, this is all very sudden.'

'What? Him being my husband?'

'No, no, all the business about Balgoris.'

'Oh yes,' said Benny. 'Do you know much about it?'

'I've done a couple of supply runs there,' said Vyshinsky.

'It's a training camp, right?'

'Well, it will be, when it's finished. Right now it's a cluster of pre-fab huts, and a big hole in the ground leading to an alien tomb.'

'Have you been in?'

'Not really,' said Vyshinsky, 'that's all cordoned off for the scientists. But there's a pretty complicated deal that brass have with the locals,

and it means we can't press on with the base until the nature of the find is... well...'

'Worked out?'

'Dealt with, yeah. And I guess that's where you come in, Stunner!'

They reached the cockpit, which was only big enough for two. The co-pilot, a stern-faced Radograsi, did not even acknowledge their presence, keeping all of its eyes focused on the screens. Baby-face Conner was staring over its shoulder. Benny took one look at the remaining chair and said:

'You know what, Vicious. I don't need to see the cockpit. I kind of know what goes on there.'

'Gotcha,' he said, slumping into one of the two comms desk benches behind the cockpit bulkhead. Benny followed suit, and tried not to comment on how intimate it was.

'Well, look at you!' she said, after a moment. 'Captain Vicious.'

'And you're a professor!' he added. 'Didn't we do well?'

Benny was reluctant to say much more. *Oh please*, she said to herself, *please don't let him ask me where I've been, as a refusal often offends.*

'So where have you been?' he asked.

'Oh, here and there,' she said, wishing that Jason would have a crisis that required her attention. The grumpy little sod, however, stayed back in the passenger area, pretending to read his rubbish book.

'Academia's all very obscure,' she said. 'You know, I spend a lot of time poking around libraries.'

'I find that hard to believe,' said Vyshinsky. 'I bet you're off on exotic digs, fighting with the locals, uncovering alien artefacts, all that sort of thing —'

'But enough about me,' said Benny swiftly, even though it clearly wasn't anywhere near. 'What's been going on with you. You're looking great!'

'Rejuvenation,' said Vyshinsky.

'Oh, really?' said Benny, taken a little by surprise. The Vyshinsky she remembered was a spotty youth, fond of jokes and pranks, obsessed with hardware and wargames. The Vyshinsky she saw was handsome and tanned, that much was sure, but he was also what for want of a better phrase she would call an old man.

'I know, I know,' he said. 'A lot of people think I'm a lot younger than I really am.'

Not this one, thought Benny. *You look like someone's granddad.*

'I did a tour of duty out at the Holy Trinity Cluster,' he said. 'Not even in this galaxy. Clothes Horses and warp drives don't even cut it. It's old-fashioned relativity and, when I got back, everyone was ten

years older except me!’

‘Wow,’ said Benny, trying to hide how truly unimpressed she was.

‘And then, get this,’ said Vyshinsky, with his trademark wink, itself starting to get on Benny’s nerves. Now that she remembered, it always had. She was trying to remember now; was Vyshinsky an old friend at all, or was he one of the tossers who had made her cadet days even more miserable than necessary?

‘Pilots are expensive,’ Vyshinsky was saying. ‘When you train one, and he doesn’t smear himself all over the first asteroid to get in his way, when he notches up a few kills and, you know, proves himself...’

‘Right,’ said Benny, not really listening. Vicious Vyshinsky, she was thinking, the one who never got the girls. The class joker. Oh, wait!

Now she remembered.

‘...then you don’t want to retire him, do you? Particularly not if he’s just racked up ten years’ pension for fifty subjective days! No, sir!’

Vicious Vyshinsky, and a drunken night raiding the supervising general’s drinks cabinet, and a silly childhood pact, that if neither of them had ‘found anyone’ by the grand old age of... what was it now?

Thirty! Benny smiled. Back then thirty had seemed so ancient and far away.

‘So what do you do?’ Vyshinsky was saying, causing Benny to flounder momentarily, until she realised it was a rhetorical question.

‘You sign him up for another twenty-year tour of duty, and you sweeten the whole deal by offering him rejuvenation treatments. You know, keep the eyes sharp. Keep the ticker ticking!’

‘That’s great,’ said Benny, absently. She was remembering her cadet days now, far more interested in them than in Vyshinsky’s living advert for rejuvenation therapies.

‘I don’t know what it is,’ said Vyshinsky. ‘I don’t know what they do. There’s a little gene manipulation, and there’s some vitamin thingies... and, I don’t know, could be monkey glands for all I know... oh.’

‘What?’ asked Benny. She craned her head around, wondering if Vyshinsky had seen something in the scanners. But all she could see was the nearing bulk of Balgoris, picked out in skeleton graphics on the monitor above Conner’s head.

‘Sorry,’ said Vyshinsky. ‘I didn’t mean to... you know.’

‘No,’ said Benny, ‘sorry I don’t know. What do you mean?’

‘Ivo,’ said Vyshinsky.

‘You knew Ivo? Really?’

Vyshinsky nodded with a sad smile.

‘I knew him,’ he said. ‘Met him about halfway through my first tour. He was a great friend to me.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Benny. ‘I really don’t believe it!’

‘What are the odds?’ said Vyshinsky. ‘And then to meet him again!’

‘Again?’

‘Yes, on Balgoris.’

‘He was on Balgoris?’

‘Er... yes,’ said Vyshinsky. ‘He died there, after all. I bumped into him on a couple of furloughs.’

‘Oh, are the monks involved?’

‘Monks? What monks?’

‘Ivo was in that Order, you know, the demi-lemur monks.’

Vyshinsky frowned, not sure if Benny was leading him on or not.

‘Ivo wasn’t a monk,’ he said. ‘He was a waiter, and a really bad one! And then he was a quartermaster, and a medic, and a bunch of other things.’

‘No, no,’ said Benny. ‘He was a monk. He was really serious about it. It was his whole life.’

‘Oh, okay,’ said Vyshinsky. ‘Wouldn’t be the first time I’d got something wrong about alien customs, and all that.’

Strange that Ivo hadn’t mentioned any of that to Vyshinsky, Benny thought. Then again, he could have been wearing his full robes and singing the ‘I am a monk’ song and Vyshinsky might still not have noticed. He had supposedly been ‘great friends’ with Benny, too, and she hadn’t seen him for decades.

‘What are the chances?’ Benny said to Jason, settling back in her seat.

‘Of what?’

‘Of meeting Vicious Vyshinsky. And of finding we have a mutual friend.’

‘In Jesus?’

‘No, in Ivo!’

Jason shrugged.

‘Your friend the captain runs cargo and people out to a remote campsite in the middle of nowhere,’ he pointed out. ‘If Ivo was working there, then of course they were going to meet up.’

Benny saw that Jason was building up to a character assassination of Vyshinsky and his career path, or rather lack of it. She decided she couldn’t be bothered with it.

‘How’s your book?’ she asked.

‘Connections,’ said Jason.

‘What?’

‘It’s all about connections. How a person’s personality has its own gravitational pull, and like attracts like, and anti repels anti.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Benny, somewhat surprised.

‘We are the sum total of everyone we’ve ever met, loved, fought with, ignored,’ said Jason, his eyes wide with mock enthusiasm.

‘That’s a bit deep for eleven o’clock in the morning.’

‘You are your old friends. Everything that they were makes you what you are.’

‘Ooh!’ said Benny. That is quite good. Is that what it’s about, then?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jason. ‘And there’s these two Welsh girls that fight vampires.’

Benny had forgotten how unnerving dropship landings could be. With no windows to see the planet getting nearer, and no perceptible movement until the anti-gravity shut off, it amounted to Vyshinsky or Conner counting down numbers from the cockpit. It was only when the dropship hit the atmosphere, ironically, when it began travelling at its slowest pace since leaving the Collection, that Vyshinsky cut the anti, and let the planet buffet the vessel like a brick in a blender.

The roar of the engines increased drastically, telling Benny that they were blowing their little hearts out, cancelling the weight of the dropship, cushioning it as it settled on its legs. And then, with a cavalier flick of a switch, Vyshinsky killed most of the power.

‘This is your captain speaking; his voice said over the intercom. ‘I’d like to welcome you to Balgoris, and wish it was under happier circumstances. See you at the funeral tomorrow, Benny. And Jake.’

‘Jake?’ said Jason, rather loudly.

‘Oh, don’t mind him,’ said Benny.

Back in his forward seat, Conner unbuckled and stood up to activate the ramp.

‘Here you are,’ he said, as the door began whirring open.

The light was piercing, the burning glint of sun on sand or snow, causing Benny to wince.

‘Blimey!’ she said, holding up a hand to shield her eyes.

Benny staggered through the heat, pointing herself at what she hoped was the Arrivals building, catching glimpses of Balgoris through her latticed fingers. She was standing on grey sand, shot through with crunchy bits of glass, a surefire sign of someone making a clearing with a fusion bomb. Dimly, she recalled she was supposed to have a backpack with her, although the sounds of protestation from Jason behind her indicated he was fully aware of this, and trying to carry them both.

Across the haze, she could make out the bleached treetops of thick jungle, which seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see, out towards hills and the horizon. Immediately in front of her, several ships sat on the grey sandy ground, docked at little tubes that fed into the main terminal.

Benny looked round, but there was just Jason, struggling with the two backpacks, his head resolutely down to avoid the worst of the glare. A black army truck was heading out towards the dropship, dragging a trailer of crates. Vyshinsky was heading straight on to the base for one more delivery. They were on their own.

Inside Arrivals there was air conditioning and dark glass. Benny

breathed a sigh of relief, staring up at the sun that scowled blue-white through the polarised windows. There was nobody around.

‘Shouldn’t there be customs people?’ said Jason.

He eyed a thirty-foot sign extolling the virtues of Balgoris – its sunny beaches, its jungle safaris and its lonely local girls.

Benny shrugged.

‘We came out of a military dropship,’ she said. ‘Probably the usual rules don’t apply.’

She pulled out her PDA and stared at the unfamiliar screen. No signal – all it could offer her was three previously stored episodes of Doctor Gorgeous, a half-completed game of Minesweeper, and her own diary.

‘Does your phone work?’ she asked.

Demonstrating impressive juggling skills, Jason extricated one arm and raised his wrist to his ear.

‘Nope,’ he said.

They strode towards the exit, at first gingerly, so as not to set off any alarms, then purposefully, annoyed that no alarms had been set off. White customs desks remained unmanned, and even unaliened.

The shells of gift shops proclaimed Balgoran souvenirs, although behind the locked shutters their shelves seemed empty. A distant tannoy announcement proclaimed a flight leaving for somewhere else, at least confirming they were not in a ghost town, but it still sounded a world away.

The baggage-claim hall was silent and gargantuan, its conveyor belts unmoving, its gravity sleds resting inactive on the floor.

‘Everything’s very neat,’ said Jason. ‘Tidy.’

‘New,’ agreed Benny. New and unused, like it was waiting for people.

A ring of glowing red around the exit corridor showed that at least the hazard scanner was in operation. It hummed gratefully as Benny and Jason walked through it, proclaiming them not to be bomb-carrying, gun-wielding terrorists on the viewscreen of an unoccupied workstation.

Once through no man’s land and out to Arrivals proper, Benny and Jason faced a sea of expectant faces. The lounge was packed with men, women and aliens clutching signs, staring intently at them.

‘Taxi?’ called a voice. ‘You want taxi?’

‘Taxi?’ called another.

‘Hey! Over here, taxi,’ said a third, and suddenly the air was alive with the same clarion call. They had not taken many more steps before it was modified, reduced rates, improved vehicles, better speeds, tours on offer. The crowd advanced on them, a hundred arms reaching out to take their luggage, a hundred insistent, polite pleas to

accept their services.

Jason clung to the backpacks, thanking the crowd for its attentions, but growing steadily more nervous. Benny attempted to push through, as a hundred hands tried to tug at her forearms.

Suddenly, a giant figure appeared out of the crowd, covered from head to toe in thick black fur, like a gangly bear in sunglasses, clutching a sign that clearly read: 'BEATRICE SMUFFERLED'. The bear-like creature pushed a few of the waiting taxi drivers out of his way, edged past a few more, and finally lifted one particularly insistent one clean off the ground.

'I am your driver,' it boomed. 'Follow me.'

After a brief scurry through the bright white sunlight, Benny and Jason were safely installed in the back seat of a familiar OS-flyer, its rotors unmoving until they were settled in and their rubbish stowed.

'Alan,' said the bear firmly.

'Excuse me?' said Benny.

'I am Alan,' it said.

'Aren't you a bit hot, under all that fur?' asked Benny.

'Yes,' said Alan, as the rotors whirled into action and the flyer took off. After some pleading, Benny managed to persuade Alan to turn on the glass, so that she could see out of the window without squinting.

As she had suspected, the airport sat in the middle of two intersecting clearings of perfect regularity – two fusion bombs, let off side by side.

What looked like an excessively bumpy road snaked away from it through the jungle, towards the cluster of buildings glinting on the horizon. Benny was glad they were doing the trip by air.

'Hotel,' said Alan. 'Hotel is Balgoris Imperial.'

'Er... yes, yes,' said Benny.

There was a long pause, broken only by the fluttering of the rotors.

Jason stared out of the window until he grew bored of the jungle – which took roughly ten seconds.

'Thank you for rescuing us,' said Benny. 'Back there, from all the drivers.'

'Miners,' said Alan the bear.

'Minors?'

'Miners. They once were miners. Now no mine. So this is tourist spot.'

'Oh, right,' said Benny. 'Popular, is it?'

'No,' said Alan. He turned his large furry head back to his scanners, and said no more.

'Here,' said Jason, proffering his PDA. 'I got what I could before we left. Meant to tell you on the dropship but you were busy catching up on old times with Nijinsky.'

‘Vyshinsky.’

‘Whatever. The mines are all gone, and Balgoris is, and I quote here, “in the process of transferring to a service economy”.’

‘Which means what?’

‘Sun, sea, sand.’

‘Well, they’ve got the sun part right,’ said Benny. Although now she could see clearly, the polarised glass was making the jungle below look rather lush and inviting. A daiquiri and a sun-lounger and some Factor 60, and this wouldn’t be that bad a place to be. At a pinch.

Someone was putting a lot of money into Balgoris. The taxi drivers at the airport weren’t the only ones waiting for the tourists. The Imperial Hotel could be seen from miles away, a huge dome in the middle of a town whose main streets, Benny could see from the air, had plenty of similarly impressive hotels, casinos and bars. The gimmicks were designed to be seen from a distance – the daylight afforded little opportunity to see them in their full glory, but Benny could pick out forests of neon tubing and dozens of holo projectors.

Come the night, Balgoris City would be a festival of animations and signposts, exhorting non-existent tourists to spend, spend, spend.

‘One wonders,’ said Benny, ‘who they are expecting to come here?’

‘Soldiers,’ said Alan the bear.

‘Oh,’ said Benny.

‘The base finish, the soldiers come. Training and resting.’

‘See,’ said Jason, ‘now it makes sense.’

Clever clever, thought Benny. Your mining colony runs out of juice, so you exploit the sunlight and the unspoiled environment. You do a deal with the army to put a base somewhere nearby, and you turn it into a furlough resort.

‘So where are the soldiers?’ said Benny. ‘It all looks a bit empty.’

Alan was silent for a moment, building up to what for him was clearly a big speech.

‘Base not finished,’ he said, after a while. ‘Delays.’

‘Delayed by what?’ asked Benny, as Alan turned the flyer into a landing circle, aiming for the landing pad that projected from the roof of the Imperial’s dome.

‘Delays,’ said Alan, stiffly.

Jason waited until they were in their plush, swish room, all soft cushions and fruit baskets, before he let rip. Benny, who had been admiring the view at the time, was not really expecting it.

‘He was talking about you, Benny!’

‘Who was?’

‘Alan the sodding bear! He was talking about the dig site!’

‘He was talking in grunts and growls about not a whole lot, as I

recall,' she said. Sunglasses, Benny was thinking. Sunglasses are definitely on the agenda. There must be a little shoppy thing downstairs. I think I saw one in reception.

'Think about it, Benny,' urged Jason. 'This whole bloody planet is relying on that base. They are waiting for tourists, and the military is going to be the first big wave.'

'Yes,' said Benny with a laugh. 'I got that impression. Did you see how many taxi drivers there were at the spaceport!'

'That's why they're so keen to get you here. That's why they'll bundle you onto a Clothes Horse warp-drive, which, frankly, should be illegal, to get you here early.'

'I thought it was jolly nice of them,' said Benny. 'They didn't have to do that. They could have made us wait.'

'Waiting's the last thing they want,' said Jason. 'Waiting's what they're doing right now, every bloody minute.'

'Why?'

'Because of the tomb!' said Jason.

'Oh, blimey,' said Benny.

'Until you sign off on that tomb, they can't finish the base.'

'Rescue archaeology...' said Benny, in a small voice.

'Bet you anything,' said Jason. 'They want you in and out in a couple of weeks.'

'But that's good, isn't it?' she said. 'That's what we wanted.'

'Yes!' said Jason. 'But what if it needs more?'

'Needs more what?'

'What if it is a really *big* find?'

'Well, it is big. We know that already.'

'Yeah, but what everyone's hoping for is one little tomb, cordoned off, scooped out, catalogued and bulldozed. What if it holds up the base construction for years?'

'It won't,' said Benny. 'There are ways around it. For Goddess's sake, they can change the shape of the base if they have to, build around it.'

'Yeah,' said Jason. 'Right.'

'Jason,' said Benny with a smile. 'Are you actually getting all excited and defensive about archaeology?'

'No,' said Jason.

Benny tickled him under the chin.

'Yes, you are!'

'No, I'm not.'

'Yes you are, my *ickle-wickle* archaeologist!'

'Sod off.'

'I think it's sweet.' But Jason was ignoring her, extracting underwear and toiletries from the backpacks. Benny noticed with some relief that her face cream had survived Vyshinsky's launch

intact.

'Look,' said Benny. 'I'm going to get some sunglasses down in the lobby. Do you want anything?' But there was no reply from Jason, and she headed off alone.

She could not suppress her gasp as she entered the elevator. A human busboy in a silly red uniform enthusiastically asked her if she wanted the lobby. Benny nodded in mute agreement, unable to take her eyes off the elevator's other occupant, a demi-lemur.

As best she could tell, from the tunic and the faint outline of nipples, it was a female. The tail flicked jerkily, as if in some irritation, and the female demi-lemur stared straight ahead. It sniffed and snuffled to itself absently, like Ivo always used to.

'Hi,' said Benny, after a time, as the floor numbers ticked away from the low thirties to the high twenties. The demi-lemur looked back at her, but said nothing.

'I suppose you are here for Ivo's funeral,' Benny said.

'Yes,' said the demi-lemur.

'I'm Bernice Summerfield,' said Benny, holding out a hand in greeting.

'I know,' said the demi-lemur, unmoving.

The elevator reached the lobby with a chiming noise, and the demi-lemur marched straight out without a backward glance.

Grief, thought Benny, *can be a funny thing. I miss him, too.*

Benny went her own way towards the small concession boutique, trying not to take it personally. The forecourt in front of it was festooned with sunglasses for multiple races, with several plastic trees concerned solely with the binocular – or at least those whose eyes stretched horizontally, and stopped before a pair of ears. There were some quite nice goldy-looking ones that might do. She tried them on, and immediately had trouble seeing anything at all.

Now that, she thought, *would keep out the Balgoran sun.*

She might be more cut up about it herself, she mused, if Ivo had been anything more than a brief encounter. Sheepishly, she realised that deep down she'd felt more traumatised by the death of her cat than by this creature who had once fought to save her life.

'Gilt,' said a voice. 'Terrible thing.'

'I'm sorry?' said Benny.

'Gilt,' said the young woman by her side, brown hair in attractive tatters from a pale face, oranges and yellows of a light sundress, and the bittersweet tang of plenty of suncream.

'All that gold will flake off in a couple of days,' continued the girl.

She looked hauntingly familiar. 'None of my business,' she said quickly, holding up hands in supplication, 'but you look like the kind of person who takes care with their appearance.'

Benny laughed.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Yes, typical me, that is!’

There was something about her that unnerved Benny to the core.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Benny found herself saying. ‘It really is you!’

‘What is?’ asked the girl, clearly worried that she’d just struck up a conversation with the hotel nutter.

‘Sarah! Remember back in sixty-five!’ she said. ‘We worked together! We shared a room! At Allott’s Hill?’

‘Sorry,’ said the girl. ‘That was, like, before I was born!’

‘Oh, right, yes...’ said Benny. ‘Sorry.’

She felt like a complete idiot. There were enough coincidences today without her looking for more.

‘Funny though,’ said the girl. ‘My mum went to Allott’s Hill.’

‘Oh blimey,’ said Benny. ‘Sarah Kiyomoto!’

‘Yes!’ said the girl, ‘Yes! That’s her!’

‘I don’t sodding believe it!’ said Benny. ‘You look just like she did! Just like her!’

‘She says that, too,’ said the girl.

‘Well, er...’ Benny felt ecstatic, though, as with Vyshinsky, part of her desperately flailed to remember if her time spent with Sarah Kiyomoto had been something she wanted to look back on. ‘Yes!’ she found herself saying.

‘Bernice,’ added the girl with a smile, offering her hand.

‘What?’

‘My name’s Bernice,’ she explained. ‘Although everyone calls me Nicky.’

It had been a long time since Jason had used an actual, honest-to-God metal razor, but he was forced to admit that he was enjoying it.

He took his time, watching the blade sweep away the white foam from his face. Perhaps he should sing a little shaving song.

The lock on the outer door beeped happily, and Benny stormed in.

‘Time out!’ she said, with an intensity Jason rarely saw. It was roundabout now that he began to wish he’d closed and locked the bathroom door.

‘What now?’ he said wearily, trying to deal with a particularly fiddly sector of his craggy face.

‘Tell me now, ex-husband, are you behind this at all?’

‘You’ll have to help me here,’ said Jason. ‘On account of you not making any sense.’

‘Look at me when I’m talking to you! Look at me!’

With extreme reluctance, Jason turned away from the bathroom mirror, his face still half-covered in white foam. Benny’s eyes dwelt momentarily on his muscular chest, and then she remembered she was

supposed to be in a strop.

‘What?’ said Jason.

‘Is this a set-up?’ she asked. ‘Tell me true!’

‘Tell me true? What kind of language is that?’

‘Are you planning a surprise party for me?’

Jason laughed.

‘At a funeral?’

‘I’m serious,’ said Benny. ‘This is exactly the kind of dumb, silly and faintly adorable stunt you would try, Jason Kane.’

Jason sniffed experimentally, wondering if he would catch a whiff of alcohol on Benny’s breath.

‘This hotel is crawling with my old friends,’ said Benny.

‘Crawling?’

‘Well, not crawling. I just found out that one is here. With her daughter, who, incidentally, appears to be named after me.’

‘So, that makes one, then.’

‘Okay, one. Plus Vyshinsky on the dropship over.’

‘Okay, that’s two. Your point being?’

‘And there are demi-lemurs here.’

‘For the funeral of a demi-lemur. I’m guessing that goes with the territory.’

‘Is it a funeral?’ demanded Benny.

‘What!?’

‘Is this a funeral?’

‘I bloody hope so,’ said Jason. ‘Because I had other things to do this weekend than ponce about here.’

‘I bloody hope so, too!’ said Benny. ‘Because if this is some elaborate ruse to get me out here, and Ivo’s going to jump out of a great big cake or something, then I won’t be happy!’

‘How would he jump out of a cake?’ asked Jason, with good reason.

‘He’s dead.’

‘Is he?’ asked Benny. ‘Because you are just the kind of tactless muppet to pretend he was to get me to come here, and then gather a bunch of people I knew, for a surprise birthday party.’

‘It’s not your birthday,’ said Jason. ‘And I’m not a muppet.’

‘Well,’ said Benny, hoping inspiration would strike. ‘Of course it’s not my birthday. Because that would be too obvious. You’ll hold it early.’

‘Really,’ said Jason. ‘I wouldn’t. I haven’t. It’s not.’

‘Okay then,’ said Benny. ‘Fine.’

She left the bathroom as swiftly as she had arrived.

Jason gingerly returned to his shaving. For a moment, there was blissful silence, and then the unmistakeable sound of a returning Benny.

‘So this is definitely a real funeral?’ she pressed.

‘Yes!’

‘You have nothing to do with it?’

‘If only! No! Nothing!’

Back in black, Benny looked out of the ground-car window. She smoothed her skirt and tugged absently at the edges of her veil. More of a visor than an all-covering shroud, it had seemed like a good idea at the time, a little scrap of black gauze that barely dipped down to her nose from her hat. How jolly swish she'd felt for a brief moment at the milliners. How sodding stupidly she'd listened to the enthusiastic gushing of a small fluffy flump of a shop girl, telling her that she was the sexiest, smartest-looking human mourner to have graced her establishment. And she'd even paid daft Balgoris Imperial hotel prices.

Now it all seemed rather frivolous and insulting, a jaunty joke-veil to wear to a funeral one wasn't taking too seriously. She still felt chilled by the cool reception from the female demi-lemur, and a little spooked by her encounter with Bernice 'Nicky' Kiyomoto.

They do grow up fast, she told herself. Look at Peter, he's already a little man. Man-dog. Alien thing. And now a friend she'd forgotten she'd had, had a daughter who looked just like her. Exactly like Sarah Kiyomoto, apart from the fact that Benny was a perfect stranger to her. Exactly like Sarah Kiyomoto, but with only the tail end of Benny's real name to suggest that Sarah Kiyomoto had ever known a Bernice Summerfield.

I could have been her godmother, Benny realised. *Sod it, if she was bloody named after me, I should have been her godmother.* She had half a mind to take it up with Sarah later that day, when Nicky had tentatively agreed to get them all together for drinks.

No, Benny, she told herself. Don't go putting your foot in it. Don't let your first words to Sarah be a complaint about not staying in touch.

Benny sighed, turning to Jason for reassurance, but he was gazing listlessly out of the opposite window.

Whichever investors and speculators were behind the rebranding of Balgoris, they were obviously trying to cover all angles. Soldiers on furlough were one main strand of future investment – the bars, nudie entertainments and manly sports requiring heavy cash outlay.

Perhaps, once that prominent and almost-famous archaeologist Benny Summerfield had signed off on the ancient ruins in a couple of weeks' time, there might even be a new form of tourism, an Alien Tomb theme park, and several hundred taxi drivers retraining as hawkers of Alien Tomb postcards and Alien Tomb replicas and memorabilia.

As their ground-car drove them through the streets of Balgoris City, Benny could see that Balgoris was going all guns for any possible means of attracting off-worlders. Balgoran banks promised

impressively low rates and no questions asked, escrow and redistribution of what could often be other people's wealth. The Balgoris Imperial was by no means the only hotel, with the boards on several building sites already attesting to future places of luxuriant repose. In one unplanned moment of excitement, Benny saw a black tornado of nano whipping up skyward, leaving the spikes and girders of a new hotel behind in its wake.

Balgoris was a place to live the high life, but it was also a place to die it. Lots on the outskirts of towns boasted billboards of geriatric facilities – not quite constructed yet, but awaiting the dying-off and bereavement of all those tourists a generation hence who might decide to settle here in their retirement. Benny stared in disbelief at empty lot after empty lot in what she termed the Street of Crumbles, this for carbon-based humanoids, that for ageing avians, another doubling as cyborg repair and renovation.

As for the final laying to rest, they already had that covered. After the brief nothingness of the old people's and old aliens' homes under construction, the ground-car motored once more through landscapes that had already received considerable attention. Fresh new trees had been transplanted by the roadside for several metres, clearly designed to give the impression of heavily wooded glades. Nor were they the lank, bleached jungle foliage of native Balgoran flora – these were hardy cypresses and conifers, with barely a glimmer of tropical genetic tweakery.

The ground-car turned into the grounds of the Balgoris First Crematorium, a majestic and sedate building, all marble curves and buttresses, rendered carefully generic but with just enough of a hint of religious familiarity. To a Christian, it might have looked like a Gothic cathedral; to a Muslim, that bell-tower might be mistaken for a minaret; to a Buddhist its multi-level structure might have the faintest hint of pagoda. The Ardjian Scientists would appreciate the stony garden of remembrance. Benny wondered how it might look to a demi-lemur from the Order of Lost Lemuroidea, who had already set up a temple in town. Presumably they'd been consulted; she hoped that it would do.

'Blimey,' she whispered to Jason, even though there was nobody else in the car but the silent octopoid driver, so low in the front seat that he was not visible to the passengers. They must be expecting a lot of customers.'

She noticed, with a slight tensing of the jaw, that Jason had somehow stashed his copy of *The Gwenan Enigma* in the inside pocket of his black funeral suit. She hoped that he wouldn't get it out and start reading during the funeral. Such behaviour was known to offend.

'The crematorium?' he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Benny. ‘Look, it’s finished and all ready to go! They haven’t built the old people’s homes yet.’

‘Soldiers,’ said Jason. ‘If there’s a military base up country, there’ll be soldiers.’

‘Ooh,’ said Benny, seeing how everything could slot into place. ‘They are clever. They bring the tourists, they bring the soldiers, they have the best hospitals...’

‘Which means the best medical care,’ added Jason.

‘Which means old people’s homes are an attractive proposition...’ said Benny.

‘Which means that Balgoris ends up being the place to die.’

‘Amazing,’ said Benny with a sick fascination. ‘They’ve thought of everything.’

‘I think you can still invest,’ said Jason. ‘If you are so inclined.’

‘What?’

Jason pointed at the advert on the back of the seemingly empty driver’s seat. It offered time-shares, mortgages, land investments and pre-investments, all in the future of the planet that promised to be the ultimate place to get away from it all.

Benny shook her head.

‘No,’ she said. ‘It leaves a nasty taste in my mouth.’

‘And you haven’t got any money.’

‘That, too. But mainly it’s the... I don’t know, the sheer...’

‘Calculation?’ suggested Jason.

‘Yes, the sheer calculation of it all.’

The car drove down a straight road through gardens that would have sent Hass cartwheeling in joy, pressure suit and all. Benny noticed that strategically placed flower beds blocked off a second, winding road that would have otherwise intersected theirs at irregular intervals. A straight road, then for those cultures that like straight things, like Lutherans. And a windy, naturally flowing road for those cultures that like windy, bendy, natural things, like Chinese spiritualists and windy, bendy aliens.

‘I suppose I must be dreadfully naive,’ said Benny. ‘But isn’t going on holiday all about living life? The people who come here, they all think they’re somehow cheating the Grim Reaper and, all the while, he’s just getting ready for them. This building, this socking great building, is all here waiting for them. Once they’ve taken their furlough money, and their holiday money, and their retirement money, and their hospital fees and rest-home money... they’ll set fire to you and charge you for the privilege.’

Jason patted her on the arm.

‘Nearly there,’ he said, as the car swept to a halt beneath a jutting porch. On a rainy planet, it might have served to keep mourners dry

when they got out of their vehicles. Here, it offered merciful shade from the glare of the Balgoran sun.

A discreet sign by the entrance announced to the grieving world that there was only one funeral scheduled for today: that of one Ivo FitzIndri. The same portrait of him that adorned Benny's invitation loomed larger in the foyer, which was empty of people and full of echoes.

'Are we late?' asked Benny. She hadn't even bothered bringing her PDA after discovering that there was no provision for them on Balgoris. Excellent for the military if they wanted monopoly of the airwaves. Not so much fun if you wanted to keep up with the rest of the universe.

'Early,' said Jason, looking into the distance, up the way they had just come. The motorcade was rolling slowly through the Balgoran morning haze, down the long and temporarily straight road to the crematorium.

The cars were the shiny black of mourning, accepted through most humanoid realms. Regardless of local customs of white for mourning on Sinic planets, or the bare chassis of Newman's World, or the long walk to the gravesite of Koulut custom, or the blue robes of Necros, there was nothing to quite beat the dark, morose cavalcade of ground-hugging, silent cars. And, Benny noted icily, walking to the grave under your own steam like the Kouluts didn't quite offer the same opportunity for rental fees, tips and hire charges.

The long snake of half a dozen low vehicles slid to a gentle halt.

There was a brief pause, and then a series of doors popped open.

'Like a monkey parade,' whispered Jason before Benny shushed him.

The demi-lemurs were out in force, a veritable dozen of them, looking gaunt and thin beneath black cowls, their tails held rigidly aloft like empty flagpoles. Benny thought she recognised the demi-lemur that had given her the cold shoulder in the elevator. She seemed to be at the centre of the simian mourners, an inadvertent nexus around which the others bunched and stood.

'That must be the wife,' said Jason, but Benny shook her head.

'Vow of chastity,' she said. 'And a bunch of other vows as well.'

'Because he was a monk,' said Jason. 'I remember. So...'

'So what?'

'So, where are the monks?'

Jason was right. The demi-lemurs were civilians, possibly even relatives. Benny caught sight of diminutive demi-lemur cubs, corralled into submission behind the main crowd. For a moment, they made her think of Peter and rue her inability to find a way to send him a goodnight message the night before. But, although they walked slowly

and sedately in uniform black, there was nobody dressed like a member of a religious order.

Benny spotted a familiar face among the crowd. The tall figure of Dave Vyshinsky, looking simply fantastic in a black navy dress uniform, was ducking out of one of the forward cars, an impressive officer's cutlass at his side. He caught Benny out of the corner of his eye, and she was sure he shot her a trademark wink, although it was difficult to tell in the glare. Dave appeared to be the only one to have forgotten his sunglasses that morning.

'Very dashing,' whispered Benny, although Jason saw fit not to reply.

Vyshinsky was accompanied by six other soldiers in matching dress blacks, marching with military precision to either side of the lead car and its coffin. They bent low and eased it along its runners, hefting the coffin gently onto their shoulders without any difficulty.

Benny thought sadly of little Ivo in such a big box.

'Why are they his pallbearers?' hissed Benny.

'Your friend the pilot said he was working on the base,' said Jason.

'They probably all knew him.'

'Yes,' said Benny. 'But what about his own race?'

'Maybe they can't lift the coffin?' suggested Jason. But Benny didn't like it. There were enough demi-lemurs in attendance to lift a car, let alone some poor dead simian in a box.

There were other humans in attendance. A girl who looked, damn her, even more fetching in black than Benny herself, pushing an old woman in a wheelchair.

A large domed electric cart, the size of a small car, whirled along in the midst of the mourners, presumably carrying an alien that required some form of localised life support – at this distance, it was difficult to tell.

The other mourners were identifiably alien. In fact, Benny was surprised to note that she could identify them all. The universe was a big place, but all the aliens in attendance were from races known to her. There were two lizardrine ambassadors from Hova in unfortunately warm robes, their tongues flicking unhappily in the hot morning air.

The human pallbearers continued their slow walk into the Crematorium's chapel, one of several on the grounds, but the only one marked for today's services. *Not enough people dying yet*, thought Benny to herself.

The demi-lemurs followed in a cluster behind the coffin, the other mourners respectfully maintaining a distance of their own – racial origin taking precedence here in everything except the choice of who carried the coffin.

Benny scowled at Jason, as if this was all somehow his fault. Jason pointed at the coffin, as if daring her to suggest that this was still some elaborate surprise-party prank.

As the slow procession advanced into the hall, fitted largely with humanoid benches, but with areas set aside for the seating required of other worlds, and even perches folded into the ceiling for future avian attendees as yet unbereaved, Benny chided herself for not being a nervous wreck. Organ music noodled slowly beneath the sound of the shuffling of mourners' feet, and the gentle hum of the motors on the anonymous electric cart.

Was this what it was like, she wondered, *burying a friend? Was this what it was like for people who had friends?* For all those people, who put down roots, who didn't disappear for decades on end, who didn't lose themselves in rowdy, pointless couplings on dig sites and half-hearted declarations of lifelong friendship, who weren't always off at some point doing something dreadfully weird. Was this what it was like, if you had 2.4 children and said hello to your neighbours, got together for coffee every week, remembered people's birthdays and wedding anniversaries? Was this what it was like if you didn't take off into the great unknown, but stayed behind? If you were left behind.

Benny felt heartless. She had shed a tear for Mr Crofton, and still thought fondly of him in the garden. She had had a sniffle over Wolsey. Bloody hell, she got weepy whenever she heard someone singing in Italian. She felt uneasy, that much was true. She felt ill-met with these people who clearly knew Ivo better than her.

She would have liked, she realised, to have known Ivo better. She would have liked to have known him well enough, so that the fact he was dead, dead, dead would mean more to her than arriving two days early for her next dig assignment and standing in line with a bunch of monkeys.

The thought wounded her, causing her eyes to brim and her nose to sniff. Jason, the silly sod, put his arm around her in a gesture of comfort, and Benny sobbed a little, not for Ivo, but for the fact she had no real tears to give him.

Standing at the front of the chapel, hands clasped, his face a rictus of sad good humour, stood a man in Christian robes – at least, they looked vaguely Christian to Benny. She wasn't close enough to make it out.

That can't be right, thought Benny. *Surely it should be someone from Ivo's order... or at the very least his species?*

Unable to resist, she lifted one corner of her ill-advised veil, so she could see better in the dimly lit hall. The shaven-headed minister at the front of the hall was definitely in robes, but they were generic and nameless, like everything else in this place of goodbyes.

'It is said,' said the minister softly, his words picked up and amplified by a microphone tucked into his lectern, 'that Buddha spoke to his followers beneath the sala tree at Kusinagara.'

Jason and Benny shot an incredulous glance at each other.

Buddha? mouthed Jason.

Benny shrugged. Military funerals had a roster of several dozen alternative orders of service. This was presumably as close as they could get to the Order of Lost Lemuroidea. Although it wouldn't have killed the Order to send one of their own to officiate – Benny thought it was a bit off for Ivo's last do to have turned into such a military affair.

'In his parting words, he reminded them of the transience of humanity...' he paused and smiled patronisingly at the demi-lemurs in attendance. 'Of the transience of all life, human, non-human and demi-human.'

Jason's eyes darted inadvertently to the squarish bulge of *The Gwenan Enigma* in his breast pocket.

'Don't you dare!' hissed Benny.

'Death,' said the minister, 'is only the end of the physical body, the body that is born of your parents, nourished by food of the world in which you find yourself, growing beneath your home worlds' gravities. As we grow, we age; as we age, we sicken and die. These things are inevitable.'

Benny stole a glance at Vyshinsky, standing to attention with the pallbearers, ten years younger than he ought to be. But still old. She caught her own reflection in one of the mirrored surfaces of a flower urn, distorted, rendered somehow golden and wide and squashed, but still far, far too young for the date on her birth certificate.

'But, in truth, what we are is not a human body. In truth, what we are, is our wisdom, our knowledge. If you see only my body, you do not see me. They only see us who accept our words and deeds.'

A demi-lemur with head bowed in reverence was walking along the row in front, handing out sticks of burning incense. As the minister continued to drone on, Benny found herself taking one, following the procession, advancing one step at a time towards the small sand table before the coffin.

The girl in black was in front of her, having left her wheelchair-bound charge back at her pew. It was only then that Benny recognised her as Nicky Kiyomoto from the day before; so much of Benny's identification of Nicky had lain in her former bright summer colours and in the crazy hair now tied up in a severe bun. It had never

occurred to her that Nicky's prior commitment had been this funeral.

With a start, Benny realised who the old woman in the wheelchair was. She turned, breaking the line, to stare back at the lady draped in a shawl despite the heat of the Balgoran morning. The old lady smiled at nothing, and did not seem to see her.

'Sarah,' whispered Benny.

A demi-lemur tugged at her arm, leading her to her turn at placing the incense. Benny half-stumbled back towards Ivo's coffin.

'All men,' the minister was saying, 'and all forms of life are surrounded with infinite love, and compassion. Our thoughts go out to those in suffering and sorrow, to those in doubt and ignorance, to those who strive towards the truth...'

Benny jammed the incense stick into the little tray, grey Balgoran sand staining her fingers. She lurched back from the coffin, all but forgetting Ivo, unable to take her eyes off the wizened, hunched, crippled form that had once been Sarah Kiyomoto.

'We are the gaps we leave in others when we go,' said the minister.

'We are the pauses in other's conversations. We are the guests who do not arrive.'

The image of the old lady shimmered and blurred in Benny's eyes.

She felt a wetness on her cheek and a tension in her throat.

Don't be silly, she told herself. *Don't cry.*

Ivo's coffin began to rise on a field of muffled repulsors, rising effortlessly, slowly into the air before the minister's upraised arms, lifting on its final journey towards an alcove in the wall, beyond which lay the fires of its pyre. Benny realised, with typical embarrassment, that she was rather blocking the view for some of the congregation, standing out all on her own in the middle of the aisle, like some toddler looking for attention.

'I'm sorry!' she tried to whisper, to a demi-lemur in the front row.

'We are the memories of our old friends,' said the minister. 'We are their laughter and their reminiscences. Let their memories be fond. Let their laughter be good. Let their friendship last beyond death.'

Ivo's coffin disappeared behind the swish of a dark curtain, and there was a shriek from behind Benny.

For a moment, she thought it was someone tuning up a trumpet; a blaring, brassy note that pierced her skull. But as it was joined by another, and another, she saw it was the demi-lemurs, each adding a keening howl of their own. A series of mournful voices, offering a final call to their friend Ivo.

Benny staggered finally back to her row, where Jason was putting one finger in his ear as subtly as possible against the high-pitched noise. He offered her a shoulder to cry on, his arm around her, and she sniffed as unobtrusively as she could.

The organ music changed key, becoming more noticeable, at least to Benny. She sat in her seat, wiping her eyes and waiting expectantly for something to happen, but that was apparently it. Members of the congregation waited, too, as the music faded and died. The minister clasped his hands and smiled sadly, before walking from the hall.

‘I think that’s it,’ said Jason.

A demi-lemur stepped up onto the minister’s small podium. Benny immediately recognised it as the female from the elevator the previous night. It sniffed to gather its wits, and then stretched up a little so that its mouth was nearer the microphone.

‘As is traditional,’ it said, ‘the mourners are invited to a celebration of Ivo’s life and friendships. The main function room of the Balgoris Imperial.’ She paused momentarily. ‘Now,’ she added, with some finality.

The demi-lemurs sprang to their feet and darted for the exit. Benny thought for a moment that the female demi-lemur glared at her, but it was difficult to tell, particularly when emotions ran so high. Benny made for Nicky Kiyomoto and her wheelchair-bound mother, but the pair were hidden somewhere in the crowd. Instead, she found herself jammed momentarily against the side of the domed cart, peering in through one of its portholes.

Inside she saw a small creature with tapir-like snout and large, expressive eyes on stalks, unmistakably one of the short-lived inhabitants of Nivis World. It was a child, staring back out at her in amazement. Despite herself, Benny waved at it, and it waved back, its mouth falling open in rapturous excitement. She smiled.

‘That’s better,’ said Jason. ‘Life goes on.’

He winced even as the platitude fell from his mouth.

‘Not for them,’ said Benny.

‘What?’

‘Those are Nivisi in there,’ she said.

‘And that’s good?’

‘Well, it’s blooming remarkable,’ said Benny, craning her neck to see if she could catch the Kiyomotos, but they were already getting into one of the cars in the motorcade. ‘I did some fieldwork on Nivisi, long time ago. They’ve got very short life-spans. If they came here for this funeral, that kid in there must have been born on the way.’

‘Really?’ Jason looked back at the domed cart. The child-Nivisi inside waved back at him. ‘That little puppet thing?’

‘Yes,’ said Benny. ‘And by the time they get back home again, he’ll be long dead.’

‘Blimey!’

‘You said it.’

‘Hell of a long way to come just to go to a funeral,’ said Jason.

‘Especially when they can’t breathe the air.’

‘Oh, they can breathe the air all right,’ said Benny. ‘That’s not a life-support system. That’s a house. They’ve probably been to sleep several times during the service.’

‘I know the feeling,’ muttered Jason to himself.

Vyshinsky offered them a ride – along with the navy contingent – but Jason pleaded off. He pointed out to Benny that they were paying for their ground-car with the octopus boy anyway. Benny knew he had other reasons, like not wanting to spend any more time than necessary in the company of suave pilots and posh-looking boys in uniform.

‘That’s not true,’ Jason said, as they got out of the ground-car back at the hotel. ‘I just didn’t fancy being crammed in some troop transport all the way home.’

‘It wasn’t a troop transport,’ said Benny in the elevator. ‘They had proper limos, didn’t you see?’ She fumbled nervously with her hat.

The veil was irritating her now, a constant reminder that she wasn’t on the same page as everyone else. Finally admitting defeat, she tore the hat from her head, and wrung it between her twitching hands.

‘It doesn’t feel right, riding in someone else’s motorcade,’ said Jason. ‘It’s not like we’re relatives or –’

He stopped himself.

‘Or what?’

‘Or friends.’

‘You never met Ivo,’ agreed Benny. ‘But I did.’

‘I wasn’t suggesting –’

‘And I do appreciate you being here,’ said Benny. ‘I know you’re here for me.’

‘And who are you here for?’ asked Jason.

Benny stared at him in a fair approximation of a bug-eyed Nivisi, as the doors opened on their floor. Jason took her hat.

‘I’ll take this back to the room, if you like,’ he said.

‘No... er... yes... fine...’ said Benny.

‘I’m just going to, you know, freshen up,’ Jason said. ‘I’ll see you in the function room.’

And with that he was gone, leaving Benny alone in the lift with the under-occupied bellboy.

The view from the function room wasn’t all that different from that from Benny and Jason’s room. The height of the Balgoris Imperial kept much of the city out of sight, instead accentuating the long, long sweep of verdant jungle – at least, verdant suited it for as long as the glass kept out the glare. Far in the distance there was the multiple glint of the spaceport buildings, complete with contrails leaping skyward and the red glow of ships landing.

It was a party.

Benny walked stiffly into the room, feeling her shoulders tensing, completely unsure of what she should be doing. Overhead speakers cranked out a waltz, while laughing military officers danced with girls in similar black dress uniforms. Balloons and streamers bundled together at the ceiling. Against the long window overlooking the jungle, there was a buffet.

Benny looked behind her for a moment, not immediately sure if she had walked into the right room. But black-clad demi-lemurs occupied an entire sector of tables, perched on their chairs with their legs tucked underneath their chins, talking animatedly to each other in their native hoots and hisses. The two Hovan ambassadors stood by the buffet table, poking inquisitively at vanilla cheesecakes, each daring the other to try it first.

Above it all were pictures of Ivo throughout his life. There was a baby Ivo, his fur in cute tufts, a toy spaceship jammed experimentally in his mouth. There was a young Ivo in the robes of the Order of the Lost Lemuroidea, looking dour and proud before the towers of the lead temple. Images of older Ivos dotted the room. Here, he was shaking hands with the Hovan ruler at a dedication ceremony. There, he crouched, dusty and happy, at an open-air Nivisi fireside, surrounded by dancing creatures. Ivo as a waiter, staring irritably at the camera as if not wanting to be caught; Ivo with similarly clad service personnel, larking about before the looming, massive bow of a liner in orbital dock, its name indistinct but still readable – Prince of Mercury.

Benny stepped gingerly into the room, nobody at the entrance to mark her arrival, to shake her hand, greet her or even give her a new brush-off to add to her collection. There were so many pictures beyond the Ivo she had known so briefly, and with each one that she saw, she felt she knew him more, and missed him all the worse.

They seemed to have so much in common. Yes, Benny thought, she'd known that before, on that lonely night on the Prince of Mercury when he'd stroked her hair and listened to the woes of her life, but even without any further contact, Ivo had been on such a similar path to hers. She saw his picture beneath suns she recognised, in places she herself had been. If they'd stayed in touch, they could have gone together, she thought. Although maybe two more days and she would have been sick of him. So difficult to tell with single-serving friends.

Here, a grim-faced Ivo stood with a disassembled rocket launcher on his shoulder, near a rocky outcrop on a featureless Holy Trinity desert, the real subject of the image being not Ivo at all, nor his sandy location, but the great, swirling wonder of the Milky Way itself, shining in a full quarter of the sky like a Catherine Wheel above him,

its central glow bright enough to banish the desert night.

Holy Trinity's sands could be seen through the clear plastic window of a Spacefleet standard tent in another image, its drab grey interior speckled with silly string and more balloons.

'That was rubbish,' said Vyshinsky behind her, handing her a white wine.

'You were there?'

'Oh, it was my party!' said Vyshinsky, sipping his own drink, and pointing to the laughing figure off to one side, somewhat compromised by a demi-feline stripper. Benny giggled, and told herself to bloody stop doing that.

'I blew half a month's pay on it, because it was like a big deal. What with time dilation and everything out there, I had, like a subjective birthday, and then ten others in lieu. All at once.'

'Sounds like a good excuse for a blowout,' said Benny.

'Yeah,' said Vyshinsky. 'For everyone else.'

Benny took a hit of the white wine and felt it cool and acrid in her throat. Shit, she thought, that's what I needed.

'I got a whole lot of booze in, which isn't easy out there. And all the other bumf that goes with a party. None of my friends from the other squads liked anyone else, and the Marines showed up. I spent most of the evening breaking up fights, and the first I knew about the tab running down was when bloody Captain Kushar asked me to buy him a drink because "the free bar was closed".'

'Ooh,' said Benny.

'And,' said Vyshinsky. obviously on a roll. I didn't get one measly finger of the finger food I paid for either! And on the way home. I stopped off for noodles, and Kushar invited himself along and underpaid his half of the bill!'

A navy girl in a lieutenant's stripes and a nursing arm-flash grabbed Vyshinsky as he was in mid-rant.

'Are we going to dance. Captain Dave?' she asked pleadingly, staring all the while directly at Benny in a stony-faced challenge.

'He's all yours, dear,' said Benny, hoping not to sound too condescending, but waving Vyshinsky off with a flurry of fingers.

There was still no sign of Jason. If the little lurker was back in the room with his nose buried in that book, she'd kill him. He was, after all, supposedly here for her to lean on. In sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, and all that, although Benny wasn't one hundred per cent sure how much of it applied if you weren't quite so married.

Nicky Kiyomoto. looking divine in her tight black number, was leant over the wheelchair in a secluded corner, as far from the speakers as the room's design would allow. Right, thought Benny. Better get this over with.

Jason Kane was not widely known for his conscience or gentlemanly conduct, but he felt he ought to at least try. Trying, as it happened, was the word of the week for dealing with his sometime wife.

Much as The Gwenan Enigma was hotting up, much as hotel cable was offering unparalleled delights, many of them on easily unscrambled channels that played all sorts of alien exotica and erotica, much as a minibar could be the friend of any man with low expectations and deep pockets, something deep in Jason's hindbrain recalled that he was supposed to be the designated plus-one on this trip. It was thus with some considerable heroism that he kept his ablutions in the hotel room to the bare minimum, steeled himself by downing a paltry mouthful of whiskey that somehow cost more than an entire full-sized bottle, and headed down to the function room.

The sight of a party, a proper party, was karmic reward. Jason felt very smug about it, and only faintly disappointed that the booze appeared to be free, and that his whiskey had hence been a wasted inoculation against boredom. He waved at Benny, who was over by some little insecty-lizard thing near the dancefloor.

'Benny!' he called, but she wasn't listening, rapt in what no doubt was an incredibly dull conversation with their self-important dropship pilot from the day before. A swift scan of the room revealed it to be primarily a military affair – lots of Spacefleet bods letting their hair down, or as far down as it would go after a regulation Number Four haircut.

But he could see the Hovans in the corner, and the little automatic cart, and a bunch of other familiar faces in the crowd – people he'd seen at the funeral and had no real desire to see again. So, how do you know Ivo...? Well I don't... didn't sound like much of a conversation to have twenty times. Thank God for the bar.

Jason waved over the barman and got a big glass of whatever was being handed out. He corralled the peanut facsimiles close to himself, and settled in for quiet.

'So, how do you know Ivo?' said a metallic voice beside him, causing Jason's heart to sink.

'I'm his ex-wife,' said Jason, for the hell of it.

Figuring she might as well do her catching up on old times before Jason turned up to sulk at her side, Benny straightened her skirt and headed towards them, edging as carefully as she could around the dance floor, and nearly tripping over a Nivisi in full tribal regalia, who had been earnestly standing by the automated cart.

'I knew you would come,' it called, from somewhere by Benny's knee. She glanced over at the Kiyomotos, and figured they weren't going anywhere. Besides, Nivisi were hardly the sort to hang around.

'Hi,' she said.

'When I was young,' said the Nivisi. 'You smiled upon me.'

'I did?' laughed Benny. 'Well, you know, you're a cute little thing.'

'I remember it,' said the Nivisi. 'It was a magical moment for me. I cherish it.'

'Oh, that's sweet,' said Benny. 'So, how do you know Ivo?'

She felt obliged to crouch, uneasy with bellowing at the little Nivisi from on high.

'Not I,' said the Nivisi. 'I never knew him. My ancestors knew him on Nivis World.'

Of course, thought Benny. How stupid of her.

'He walked among us for many generations,' said the Nivisi.

'I never knew,' said Benny, in genuine surprise. 'Was he a god to you?'

The Nivisi laughed a long and musical series of titters.

'Oh, Bernice Summerfield,' it said, 'we are not the simple people you once knew. We are sophisticated. Modern. We do not think all off-worlders are gods.'

'Right, sorry,' said Benny. She was pretty sure she'd been the subject of a bit of divine adoration herself back in her youth, but the Nivisi were dreadfully naive back then. As, she supposed, she had been, too.

'He was dear to us, and a friend to the north Nivisi and, on hearing of his death, members of my family were dispatched to attend in his honour.'

Benny looked back at the cart, which had seemed so big and bulky before, but seemed like a pitifully small place to live one's life.

'We have stasis fields,' said the Nivisi, 'and automated transport.'

'But even so,' said Benny, 'How long has it been?'

'My ancestors left Nivis World,' said the Nivisi. 'My descendants shall return to tell of our deeds. With pictures.'

'Right then,' said Benny.

'And video,' added the Nivisi proudly.

Benny nodded sagely. The creature seemed quite excited about it all, although Benny realised it was effectively generations of exile.

'I like you,' said the creature.

'Well, I like you, too,' she said.

'There is a secular movement,' said the creature. 'Of course.'

'Oh, of course,' said Benny, not understanding a word.

'We understand now that the universe is very different. That off-worlders are not gods. That our planet is owed reparations for past misdeeds.'

‘Oh yes,’ said Benny. ‘I’m glad that’s been sorted out.’

‘But,’ said the Nivisi, beckoning her closer. Benny leant forward obligingly.

‘I knew when I saw you,’ it said, ‘at the funeral. I knew. I felt love in my heart for you.’

Benny blushed.

‘That’s very sweet,’ she said. ‘But, you know, I’m sort of married, and you are –’

‘Old, I know,’ said the Nivisi.

‘Er... well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that,’ said Benny.

‘What is that human phrase, so cutting in its disregard of our biology?’

‘Beats me,’ said Benny. ‘There’s so many to choose from, particularly in English!’ She grinned, hopefully, but the Nivisi was quite intent and intense.

‘Born yesterday, that is it,’ said the Nivisi. ‘Do not think me stupid, for I was not born yesterday. Well, what of those of us that were?’

‘It’s just a figure of speech,’ said Benny. ‘I don’t think it was aimed at winding up Nivisi.’

‘Regardless,’ said the Nivisi. ‘I was hatched far from my homeworld, on a mission of condolence to Ivo, who was a dear friend of my ancestors, and dwelt among us for many of our generations.’

A long weekend, then, thought Benny, although she thought better of voicing the quip aloud.

‘And in this first and last Balgoris morning of my life, I saw you smile upon me,’ it continued, repeating itself with the doddering pomposity of old age. It was all very sweet, thought Benny, but this was less than an hour ago, and really not a big deal.

The Nivisi beckoned her closer still.

‘It is heresy, but I shall speak to my grandchildren of you,’ it said.

‘It is unfashionable to believe in the gods of old, but there is something divine about you.’

Benny wondered to herself about the ethics of getting into a prolonged argument with someone who probably only had an hour or so to live. ‘Okay,’ she said warily.

‘It has been a pleasure knowing you,’ said the Nivisi.

‘Oh, surely, the pleasure is all mine,’ said Benny. ‘I feel like we’re old friends!’

The Nivisi backed away from her in a series of small kow-tows, back towards the electric cart, where a series of even smaller creatures of its race greeted it with the high-pitched and super-fast chitters of their native language.

Benny watched the family retreat back into the automated cart, the smile frozen on her face.

'I pick 'em,' she said to herself through gritted teeth. 'I really do.'

A waiter at her side inclined his head politely.

'I must have,' said Benny. 'A big old Loonies Welcome sign over my head. Although!' she added swiftly, depositing her glass on the tray and seizing another. 'Not you! Obviously! Not at all. Thanks!'

She marched swiftly towards the Kiyomotos in their corner, waving unsuccessfully for Nicky's attention. The young woman only noticed her when she was practically hovering over the table.

'I had no idea,' she said, seeing Benny in black, 'that you were a friend of Ivo, too!'

'It's a small universe,' said Benny.

'You'd be surprised how many blank spots there are when you're pushing an old lady in a chair,' said Nicky. 'It's a regular cloak of invisibility. Particularly at parties.'

Benny accepted the implied offer of a seat and plonked herself down next to the aged Sarah Kiyomoto, the edges of her eyes lined with folds of crow's feet; her face almost clown-like beneath daubs of shakily applied rouge.

'Bernice...' said the old lady, 'Is that you...?'

'It is,' said Benny. 'How are you, Sarah?'

Behind her aged parent, Nicky pointed enthusiastically at the bar, unaware of how much like her young mother she looked for an instant. Benny gave her a thumbs-up – *let the girl enjoy herself for a bit*, she thought, *while we old biddies catch up*.

'Did I ever tell you,' said the old woman, 'about who you were named after?'

'Ah,' said Benny. 'No, Sarah, it is actually me. Bernice Summerfield.'

'That was her name,' said Sarah. 'Bernice Summerfield. It's why you're missing an E.'

'No,' said Benny. 'I am Bernice Summerfield.'

There was a pause while Sarah digested this information. She seemed completely unmoved by it, as if nothing would surprise or impress her any more.

'Bernice Summerfield was my best friend,' said Sarah.

Benny wasn't sure how to take the 'was' in that sentence.

'Phere-nike, Bearer of Victory,' said Sarah to someone who wasn't there. 'With that consonant mutation from Greek to Macedonian, that makes a PH become a B. A whole load of queens of Egypt. A princess of Judea. And Latin doesn't have a K, so by the Roman era, K becomes a C.'

'You and your Greeks and your Romans!'

The old woman's eyes lit up as she recited her party piece of old.

'The wife of Ptolemy III, who raised an army against the fiance she despised, who sacrificed her long hair to Aphrodite for her husband's

victory in battle. A lock of hair placed in the sky, the tuft in Leo's tail, now known to be the home of the Black Eye Galaxy, home of the Needle!'

'Yes,' said Benny. 'We did the grand tour, remember? All the stars in my name! We started at Diadem, then Beta Coma Berenices –'

'Ha!' said the old woman. 'Made you say it!'

'Oh, you cow!'

'What happened to your other E, Bernice?'

'You wouldn't let it lie!'

'Lost it somewhere in the middle ages, no doubt. Some medieval monk too busy with his illuminations. Some copyist's error.'

'Yes-yes, my very name is a cock-up. I still have the T-shirt you got me. Happy?'

'Why aren't you wearing it?'

'Why aren't you wearing yours?'

'What do you mean?'

'What kind of name is Sarah for a Japanese girl?'

'I'm not Japanese! I'm a brunette! I look whiter than you!'

Bernice bit her lip and stared at the straggly white hairs that were all that remained. She doubted Sarah Kiyomoto had been a brunette for a couple of decades.

The cyborg hadn't lasted long. Jason wasn't much in the mood for staring a series of robotic augmentations in the face. He wasn't in a happy place, right now, when it came to cyborgs. Nothing personal, not machinist or anything, but he could do without talking to one.

Luckily, the tinman had taken the hint and marched off soon after Jason entered into a swift and tasteless outline of all the ways a man and a monkey might entertain themselves alone. Jason's little corner of the bar now just belonged to him. Oh, and the Admiral.

The Admiral had observed Jason's erotic boastings with a single arched eyebrow of disdain and had not returned Jason's gesture of a cheerily raised glass as the cyborg beat its hasty retreat.

The Admiral, Jason had decided, was a prat. *Another more martial than thou type like Vyshinsky*. Sat there at the bar with his fizzy water and his receding hairline, listening conspicuously to a single headphone, he was patently not enjoying himself. Although Jason suspected that was all part of the act. Sit there, looking mature and distinguished, with your zillion coloured medal-patches set off nicely over your breast pocket.

Jason wasn't a fan of Spacefleet types particularly, but he knew anyone with that many stripes on his cuffs wasn't pushing around a speedboat. Nor should they be running security at a wake for a monkey.

‘What’s the score?’ asked Jason, unable to resist. The Admiral just stared back at him, mystified.

‘Cricket is it?’ said Jason, tapping his ear in explanation.

‘No,’ said the Admiral, very deadpan, as if bothered by a small and slightly tipsy fly.

Jason could see very well that his conversation was unwelcome, which only encouraged him all the more. The Admiral, however, did not seem that keen on eye contact. Instead, he was scanning the room, his eyes moving at intervals that Jason began to discern were regular.

With nothing better to do except drink more and ogle the lady Spacefleeters on the dance floor, Jason looked where the Admiral was looking.

Not everyone in the room was having a good time. Not everyone was partying away their sad thoughts of a friend gone forever, or, in the case of the demi-lemurs, just sitting there and jabbering about it.

Jason counted four, no, five tall, imposing Spacefleet officers, built like the proverbial outhouses, standing at what only the military could possibly describe as ‘ease’. In a room largely preoccupied with waltzing around the dance floor, they stood out as if they were standing bolt-upright to attention, whispering occasionally into their cuffs, and looking in all directions, for what Jason could only assume was trouble.

‘Didn’t see you at the funeral,’ said Jason to the Admiral.

‘I wasn’t there,’ said the Admiral.

‘Security, is it?’ said Jason.

‘Yes,’ said the Admiral, with some irritation. ‘I am on duty right now. So if you don’t mind.’

‘I don’t mind at all,’ said Jason, reaching for an open bottle of vodka left out on the bar. ‘Don’t mind if I do.’

The Admiral hopefully, vainly returned to ignoring Jason.

‘Expecting trouble, are we?’ asked Jason.

‘Not really,’ said the Admiral.

‘Could have fooled me,’ said Jason.

‘I have seven alien diplomats in this room,’ said the Admiral. ‘I have an entire tribe of Nivisi. And I have a bunch, if that is the term, a whole damn bunch of demi-lemurs whose friend, rest his soul, passed away on Spacefleet property, under Spacefleet protection, Mister...?’

‘Kane. I see.’

‘No you don’t,’ said the Admiral. ‘That’s enough of a headache as it is. And that’s before I have to deal with the fact that there are also several convicted felons in the room.’

‘Ooh,’ said Jason. ‘Trouble, are they?’

‘You wouldn’t believe,’ sighed the Admiral.

‘Have you met my daughter?’ she said, after a while. ‘I named her after you.’

‘Oh Sarah,’ said Benny. ‘What happened to you?’

The old lady tried something approximating a smile.

‘I got old, Benny love. I got old! Don’t look so surprised!’

Benny had trouble reconciling this venerable creature with the Sarah Kiyomoto she had known – all thigh-boots and Chardonnay, ladette bravado and late-night kebabs.

‘But, Sarah, this is the twenty-seventh century,’ Benny protested.

‘There are treatments, therapies!’

‘For some,’ said Sarah, without bitterness. Her eyes suddenly flashed clear, with some semblance of the Sarah of old. ‘There are machines they’ll shove into you and onto you. And they’ll cut off the bits that might kill you. And they can make you part machine, or freeze you until you’re ready for the next party, or...’ She paused, staring with narrowed eyes at Benny.

‘What happened to *you*?’ she said, suddenly. ‘Are you really Bernice Summerfield. Not just some knock-off?’

‘I’m not a clone,’ said Benny, ‘if that is what you are implying.’

‘Good,’ said Sarah. ‘Nevertheless, *young* lady, time has been good to you.’

‘It’s... it’s a long story,’ said Benny.

‘Do I look like I’m going anywhere?’ said Sarah.

‘No,’ said Benny, immediately regretting it.

‘My mind goes, you know,’ said Sarah. ‘It wanders in and out. Sometimes I’m lucid, and sometimes I’m a dotty old bag.’

Benny grimaced in what she hoped was sympathy and disbelief.

‘Don’t get old, Benny. Don’t get old,’ said Sarah, half to herself.

Benny waited for more, but Sarah seemed momentarily preoccupied with the lights of ships landing at the distant spaceport.

‘It’s good to see you,’ said Benny. ‘Sarah, it’s good to see you! It’s been...’

‘Decades,’ said Sarah.

‘A very long time,’ Benny agreed.

‘I drift in and out, I know that,’ said Sarah. Benny wondered if the old lady knew she was already repeating herself. ‘Sometimes I’m all there, sharp as a pin, chasing the doctors with a stick. And sometimes, well. I get blank moments. I think. I think they’re kinder, in a way.’

Benny sipped nervously at her drink.

‘I’m 71, you know,’ said Sarah.

‘Yes,’ said Benny. ‘I suppose you must be.’

‘So these troublesome elements,’ said Jason to the Admiral. Is Benny Summerfield one of them?’

‘What makes you say that?’ said the Admiral, sharply.

'Because you keep looking over at her and the old dear,' said Jason.

'And I somehow doubt grandma's on your most wanted list.'

'You know Bernice Summerfield?'

'Know her? She's my bloody wife!' said Jason.

'I see,' said the Admiral.

'I'm a plus-one, see,' said Jason. 'I don't show up on your guest list.'

'I'm sure you check out,' said the Admiral.

'You don't know that,' said Jason. 'I might be a terrorist.'

'If I have reason to suspect that you are, I can have you arrested and held without trial for some time,' said the Admiral, brusquely. 'So, please. I do have duties to perform.'

'I write dirty books,' said Jason, slurring his words slightly. 'For aliens.'

Breathing slowly and calmly, the Admiral raised himself up from his bar stool, and moved three stools down.

'Suit yourself,' said Jason. Someone brushed against him on the other side, and he turned half-expecting Benny. But she was still over with the old granny. Instead, he found himself looking at something much more interesting than a stuffy old Admiral.

The girl with auburn hair tied up in a severe bun looked very good in black, Jason thought. And, most mercifully, she wasn't wearing a Spacefleet uniform or an auxiliary derivative either. She asked at the bar for a G&T and let out the long sigh of a woman who had been pushing a chair around all day. She looked over at Jason, unafraid and unashamed. She smiled.

'Before you ask,' she said, 'I don't know Ivo.'

'Oh, thank God!' said Jason. You're another plus-one.'

She nodded with an impish smile.

'I could tell you were from a mile off,' she said. 'Saw you lurking at the ceremony with Professor Summerfield.'

'Yes,' said Jason, 'I'm lending my support.'

'Propping up the bar?'

'She looks like she can look after herself,' said Jason, although it wasn't clear whether he was talking about Benny or the old woman with whom she was talking.

Nicky Kiyomoto followed his gaze to the pair in the corner.

'So that's the famous Bernice Summerfield,' she said.

'The one and only,' said Jason. 'My ex-wife,' he added, feeling that such things should be explained, for some reason, however misleading that explanation might be.

'And you're still there for her, that's sweet,' said Nicky.

'You know, you can get chairs with little motors,' said Jason. 'Self-guiding, big power sources, like an activity centre on wheels. Save your arms the bother of pushing her around all day.'

Nicky *tsk*'ed, half to herself.

'You're assuming my mother is in a fit state to be in charge of a knife and fork,' she said. 'Let alone a vehicle.'

'Oh, I see,' said Jason. 'Like that, is it?'

The Hovan diplomats were walking past Sarah's table, staring at Benny over the cheesecake wedges piled on their little plates.

'May your eggs multiply,' said Benny cheerily, all but exhausting her Hovan vocabulary. She'd never met them before, but she still felt a kind of affinity for the lizard men; still had one of their statues somewhere in her office rooms, actually.

The diplomats hissed excitedly and spat a series of phrases back at her, none of which Benny understood, but probably something to do with eggs and little lizards.

'Same to you!' said Benny, cheerily.

'Hovans,' she said to Sarah. 'I was there on a dig site for a while. Ended up with the keys to the city, or the teeth to the meat, or whatever they called it there. Actually quite nice when you get to know them. Bit prejudiced against mammals, actually. Amazing that Ivo ever went there, too... Sarah...?'

Sarah Kiyomoto was staring off into the middle distance.

'What, dear?' she said, after a moment.

'Sorry,' said Benny. 'I was busy changing the subject. You were telling me what a frightful bitch I was.'

'Was I?'

'Yes,' said Benny. 'Bernice Summerfield. Old Miss Reliable. Queen Bitch of the Bitchtown Bitches of Bitchland.'

'I'm 71, and people make excuses for me,' said Sarah. 'And they listen to my stupid stories.'

'Oh right,' said Benny.

'Which, by the way, none of them believe.'

'Really?'

'I tell them that I was a go-go dancer on Winvald. A millionaire's bodyguard -'

'And sometime mistress!' laughed Benny.

'You remember! A millionaire's bodyguard along the Ring Riviera,'

Sarah chuckled softly to herself. 'I say to them, you young tossers don't know real hardship. You've never run guns to the resistance. You've never volunteered for the Ondul round-system rally...'

'...without knowing how to fly a starship!' giggled Benny.

'The things we did,' said Sarah. 'That guy who tried to take out a contract on himself...'

'You were a rubbish assassin!' said Benny.

'I was better than you!' countered Sarah. 'The illegal printing press on Beta Cygni. That unpleasantness with the Hovan independence movement... They say to me, you're a silly old woman, you're making

it all up. You're not still wanted under a dozen aliases. You're not a criminal to some and a heroine to others. Nobody could have done all these things. And I say to them, *sod off!*'

Benny laughed.

'I tell them to stuff it, because I did them all with Benny Summerfield, and we were a right pair of dangerous tarts in the sixties.'

Benny nodded, remembering it all, not realising that the trap was being carefully set.

'And then they say to me, all right then Miss Kiyomoto, where is this Benny Summerfield, then? Let's see her! Why doesn't she come to your parties? Why isn't she here for your daughter's christening? Graduation. Marriage. Divorce.'

'Ah,' said Benny, 'Well...'

'If she's such a bloody good friend of yours, why doesn't she write? If you're so hard up, can't she lend you a hand? If you're not a stupid, ugly, mad old bat, why don't you produce your, your... friend and we can all hear about it.'

'Listen,' said Benny. 'I've lost touch with a lot of people, what with the war and everything.'

'Don't blame the war!' spat Sarah. 'You knew where to find me. I hardly moved from Tucanis after you ran out.'

'Well, I didn't know -'

'I was pregnant. I had no money. Where was I going to go?'

'Look,' said Benny. 'I realise I've been a very bad best friend, but can we put this behind us. I'm here, now. Aren't I?'

'Ivo believed me,' said Sarah, looking up at one of the pictures on the wall. 'At first I thought that he was a nice demi-lemur, and that he liked little Nicky, and he liked me. And that was all true, I'm sure he did.'

'He was,' said Benny, hoping to move the subject around to something less unpleasant, 'a lovely person.'

'He believed all my stories about my glory days with Benny Summerfield. He listened to them all, he devoured them.'

'Oh bless him, he did love to listen.'

'He believed me,' said Sarah, slowly and deliberately, 'because he knew. He believed me, because he knew what it was like to have Benny Summerfield walk into his life and then disappear with no thought of the mess she leaves behind.'

'I'm sorry,' said Nicky. 'It must be awfully boring hearing me go on.'

'No,' soothed Jason, topping up her glass. 'Not at all.' He was finding out a whole bunch of things about a young Sarah Kiyomoto, and hence a young Benny Summerfield, that would allow him to keep

embarrassing her for weeks to come, months even.

‘I so rarely get a chance to talk to anyone, you know, under a hundred!’

‘You’re wasting your time with me then, love,’ said Jason. ‘I’m six centuries old!’

Nicky giggled dutifully and slapped at his arm, almost falling off her barstool in the process.

‘You can meet my mother, if you like,’ added Nicky. ‘I mean, she’s only over there.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Jason, seeing Benny looking intensely miffed mid-conversation over in the corner. He quite preferred the younger model.

‘She could tell you all these stories herself,’ said Nicky. ‘Well, if she’s having one of her more cogent episodes.’

‘Does that happen often?’ asked Jason.

Nicky shook her head.

‘Only when she’s stark-raving mad about something,’ said Nicky.

‘Gets right on my nerves. She can spend half a morning wittering on about king this and duke that, and lady the other, and thinking she’s on a beach somewhere in Mosforth, or on the run from Etiosk mind thieves, or something daft like that. Mad as the trees!’

Jason remembered that he really, really liked funerals, particularly when they were some complete stranger’s. They were like weddings with a better dress code and no faffing with a gift list. And when there was one of those mandatory wakes with instructions to enjoy yourself because it’s what old Whoever would have wanted, it was a licence to party.

‘And then!’ said Nicky conspiratorially, grabbing Jason’s arm in mock surprise. He felt her hand linger for a moment longer than absolutely necessary. Or maybe it was the wine and whiskey.

Whatever it was, Jason bloody loved funerals. ‘And then,’ continued Nicky, ‘suddenly she’s clear as sodding day, and tearing a strip off me because I moved the flowers, or didn’t move them, or hid her hairbrush, or some other nonsense.’

‘Terrible,’ agreed Jason.

‘What are the bloody odds?’ added Nicky, waving a finger in the air for emphasis. ‘Ten billion exotic diseases, pathogens, curable by drugs or gene therapy. Euphorgens, that you don’t want cured at all. And what gets my mother? Plain old age.’

‘There’s cures for that, too,’ Jason pointed out.

‘Only if you can afford them,’ said Nicky. ‘And even then, if the brain’s gone, it’s too late. Three billion years of evolution, and Alzheimer wins again. They say we had a cure for it once, before the war...’

‘It must be very hard for you,’ said Jason, topping up her drink again.

‘She’s my mother,’ said Nicky, anticipating the next couple of questions. ‘At least,’ she added, ‘sometimes she still seems that way.’

‘Sarah?’ said Benny. ‘Sarah?’

But the old woman was staring into the middle distance again.

Benny snapped her fingers irritably.

‘Don’t play that game with me!’ said Benny. ‘You can’t just stop mid-rant! I can explain everything. Well, most of it. Did I say I’d be back? Well, I meant it!’

Sarah’s eyes blinked a little and then appeared to fix once more on Benny.

‘Bernice Summerfield,’ she said, as if seeing her for the first time.

‘Well I never.’

Benny swiftly tried to work out a way of telling Sarah the truth. The trouble with time travel was that it tended to make you a little laissez-faire with appointments. You don’t just have one hour before lunch; you have as much time as you want, and even if you miss lunch by a mile, there is still a chance to pop back just beforehand and arrive bang on time. The trouble with time travel is that, after ten years of it, you tend to develop extremely lax attitudes about exact dates and places. You get used to meeting every deadline by the skin of your teeth, if necessary by living the same day three times over. You never have to explain. You never miss a phone call. You are always there with a shoulder to cry on and a tub of exactly the right ice cream. You never miss a birthday or an anniversary, at least not if given a few dry runs at it.

The trouble with time travel is that you so easily get used to it and, if it suddenly isn’t there any more, it comes as something of a shock.

Particularly if your last big journey of any note dumps you back home an entire generation after you popped out for some milk. A bunch of things you were putting off till tomorrow or, rather, another go at yesterday, are suddenly completely beyond your reach. And everything falls apart.

All of which, Benny thought, sounded like a good start in any opening explanation and cry for forgiveness, apart from one tiny issue.

The real trouble with time travel is that one is not supposed to talk about it.

‘I did kind of hope,’ said Nicky Kiyomoto, ‘that Mum would actually forget she wanted to go to this funeral.’

‘No such luck, eh?’ said Jason.

‘I did wonder why she was so keen,’ said Nicky. ‘She didn’t actually mention that Bernice Summerfield would be here.’

‘Would that have made a difference?’

‘Probably not. They can talk to each other until their heads drop off.’

‘Right.’

Jason made to put more wine in Nicky’s glass, but she stayed his hand.

‘I do,’ she said, ‘need to keep my wits about me.’

‘I don’t think you’ll be needing them at a party like this,’ said Jason.

‘I will if I’m going to have a dance,’ said Nicky. ‘For as long as Mum and Summerfield are boring each other, I’m a free agent.’

‘Well,’ said Jason. ‘Would you like to dance?’

‘I bloody well would,’ said Nicky Kiyomoto, pulling a pin from her hair as if readying a grenade, causing a coil of brown hair to flap down around her shoulders.

Oh my, thought Jason, *Miss Perkins!* And with that, he was led, not really protesting, away from the bar.

‘Sarah? Can you hear me? You’re putting this on, I know it.’

But Sarah Kiyomoto, seemed to be dozing off. Benny looked around her for some clue. Was this a good thing? A bad one? The waltz was loud enough to wake a fossil, but old Miss Kiyomoto was drifting off nonetheless.

‘Can you hear me in there? You can’t be a bitch on wheels one moment and a sleepy old dodderer the next. Sarah?’

Benny looked for Nicky, not seeing her immediately. It had been bad enough dealing with a half-Killoran baby, but nothing had prepared her for an old woman who didn’t know her own mind.

Benny caught sight of Nicky’s brown hair through the whirl of couples on the dance floor, a momentary flash of red-brown amid the circulating black uniforms. *Right*, thought Benny, *at least* someone’s *letting their hair down*. *Don’t mind me, Nicky, I can babysit. Or lady sit, presumably is the term.*

Benny got a second glance at who Nicky Kiyomoto was shuffling up against, ready for a saucy little dip and a spin.

‘Jason Bloody Kane!’ she said aloud. She looked back in exasperation at the old lady, but Sarah was paying no attention to her or anything else.

The music changed to a slower tune, heavy in saxophones and mournful bass, the genre that Jason liked to refer to as a snog-and-shuffle number. This was what separated the men from the boys – well, it wasn’t that kind of party, but it separated the girls who danced around their handbags from the girls who were looking for something to hang on to. If you were still partnered up when the S&S number came on, then you were on to something, like it or not.

Nicky Kiyomoto didn't seem to be going anywhere. She leaned in close, allowing Jason to marvel at how thin her waist was.

'This is great,' he said, inadvertently.

'Yes it bloody is,' said Nicky, her words barely more than a whisper, her breath slapping sibilants wetly against his ear, close enough for Jason to get the faintest hint of tongue. He held her closer, and she wriggled obligingly.

Moment, thought Jason. Moment, enjoy the moment. Enjoy the fact that this girl, right here, right now, has got her arms around you.

He tried not to speculate on whether or not Nicky Kiyomoto was truly up for it. But such speculations were Jason's stock in trade. He spent his waking, working hours contemplating sex without consequences, although for the purposes of his work it was usually between consenting slugs, or froglike pirates intent on seizing the spawn of their amphibian captives. For Jason, it could all get rather clinical. It was difficult to get too excited about the ups and downs of zero-gravity jellyfish. But Jason was getting very excited about Nicky Kiyomoto.

Her neck smelled of peaches and aniseed, which really didn't help.

A metaphorical angel at his shoulder reminded him that he really ought to be checking on Benny.

Not too willing to give up on such a good and willing thing, Jason attempted to manoeuvre his dance partner around a little, all the better to get a look at Benny's corner. If she was deep in conversation, then maybe that imaginary angel was wrong.

Maybe the angel was wrong, suggested a metaphorical devil.

Maybe the angel was an interfering busybody who couldn't leave well enough alone. Maybe the angel was too dumb to realise that Bernice and Sarah had a whole lot to catch up on, and that the best possible way Jason Kane could help was to keep Sarah's daughter occupied elsewhere. Jason would be the hero of the hour, the brave husband who had entertained the children while the grown-ups caught up on old times.

'Do you think,' he whispered haphazardly, after a couple of attempts to clear his throat, 'that your mother will be all right?'

'Oh God yes,' said Nicky. 'Leave them to it.'

See, said the devil, see? You're doing the right thing.

No, said the angel, no you're not. You dirty old man. Could you please, just for a moment, consider your wife's feelings.

Actually, said the devil, he's been considering her feelings for days on end.

Shut up, said the angel. I am trying to stop Mr Kane from thinking about inadvisable associations. This girl is clearly up for it, the party is clearly in full swing, and there is very, very little indeed to prevent

this couple sloping off to one of the many available private spaces in this building. He's probably wondering what harm it could possibly do, and the answer, in the great scheme of things, is probably none.

There might be a little irritation over in the ex-wife camp, but really, let's be honest here, in a hundred years, who's going to care? We've been here before. Benny understands – or, more weirdly, only finds Jason attractive when other women do.

And besides, who knows, maybe this Nicky Kiyomoto is something special. You believe in fate? Well, maybe you don't, but if you do, think of this. Maybe this isn't Benny's story at all. Maybe you just thought it was because you're the guy who carries the bags and endures the taunts, and watches glumly from the sidelines while *ex-wifey has the real adventures*. Well, you know, it's not all about her.

It doesn't have to be about her. You're Jason Kane, and you're special, too, and maybe, just maybe, this is that fateful day when your life takes a change for the better, and you meet your new, next soulmate, future ex-Mrs Kane. Feel free, by the way, Mr metaphorical devil, to jump in with a refutation.

Except the metaphorical devil was buffing his metaphorical nails while the angel got his wings in a tizz. As creations of the mind of a man who wrote pornography for a living, neither were much good at dialectical reasoning, but both spent a lot of time trying to set up scenes in which bonking was likely to take place.

'Are you all right?' asked Nicky Kiyomoto.

'Oh yes,' whispered Jason. 'I am very much all right.'

Are you really, asked the devil. Because, since the angel is too dumb to notice, I feel I should point out that all you have here is a drunken thirtysomething with a full-scale flirt on. And, not to be too blunt or nothing, but you're no oil painting, and there's plenty of other options to choose from. Make a wrong move here, and you'll be sleeping in reception because Benny's flipped, and you won't be getting your end away with Nicky, either. So let's not worry about who you're kissing goodnight tonight, let's worry about who you want to be kissing goodnight tomorrow, and the day after that.

At times like this, Jason wished that his angel and his devil would resolve their little demarcation dispute and establish just who was supposed to be arguing what, because now he was thoroughly confused. Was it a good thing for him to get off with Nicky Kiyomoto, or a bad thing, because neither of them seemed to have worked it out? Forced to think for himself, he made a decision.

Dance, he had decided, was pornography in the open – five minutes of pushing and shoving, of claspings and whispering, for strangers who had possibly just met, and perhaps would never meet again, to hold each other while the music played. It was sex in metaphor and

promise, a momentary distraction from the inevitable creep of the reaper, devoid of all consequence and meaning, complete with opportunities for every perversion he could think of – wife-swapping and incest, orgies and troilism, man-alien, man-robot, man-anything. It was bloody fantastic, that was what it was, but when this dance was over, he would let Nicky Kiyomoto slide off in search of someone else, and he would do what he was supposed to do, what he was destined to do, and go be with Bernice Summerfield.

Probably.

‘Sarah,’ said Benny. ‘Sarah?’

‘Listen, love, I don’t know if you can hear me or not, but you’re starting to freak me out. I’m going to go and get your daughter, and she can tell me if you need pills, or burping or whatever it is that old people need.’

Sarah said nothing, but appeared to be humming a song.

‘I’m sorry, all right?’ said Benny. ‘I’m sorry you got old. But you know what, I’m not sorry I haven’t yet. We all get old. I’ll be there soon enough. I haven’t had any more life than you. It just looks that way right now because you got to have all yours in order.’

Sarah said nothing, and appeared to be asleep.

‘You get the friends you deserve, I guess,’ said Benny. ‘I think you were too good for me. Or something.’

‘After this dance’ said Jason, ‘I really should be getting back to Benny.’

Nicky wailed wantonly, and did not seem to let her hold on him slacken.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘I suppose we both should.’

‘Okay,’ said Jason. ‘Maybe we could have another dance later.’

If it was possible for Nicky to hold him tighter, she did.

‘That would be nice,’ she said. ‘I was worried I was boring you with all the talk about what they used to get up to.’

‘I’d still love to hear more about it all,’ said Jason. ‘It’s part of Benny’s life that she never really talks about much.’

‘For what it’s worth, most of what I know from Mum only comes from when she’s going into one of her ravings. For all I know she’s making it all up.’

‘From what I know,’ countered Jason, ‘the weirder it seems with Benny, the more likely it is to be true.’

‘Must be nice,’ said Nicky, leaning into his shoulder.

They turned again on the dance floor, and Jason forced himself to look up from the attractive slopes of Nicky’s neck, to the function room in which they found themselves. Lizardine Hovans forked inquisitively at strange desserts and, as Jason and Nicky turned once more, a group of small creatures seemed to be waking up after what must have been a noisy subjective night spent sleeping in their mobile robot home. The dancers turned again, and Jason saw the glum cyborg he had brushed off, talking to the smug bulk of Dave Vyshinsky.

Step, step, step – turn! And Jason could see the bar, attended by a cluster of tipsy demi-lemurs and, sitting above them all, the frowning

misery of the Admiral, with his earpiece and his medals.

Step, step, step – turn! The far wall, over by the music, over by the doors to the kitchens and the corridors that led to multi-species toilets. Not so many people here, just the towering images of Ivo looking down upon the ceremony. Jason wondered, for a moment, what kind of images of him might adorn his own funeral. There was nothing that seemed all that suitable, nothing regal and cool-looking enough. He resolved to make sure he could be caught on camera in some good-looking places, so that his grieving ex-widows might have something nice to hang on the walls.

Step, step, step – turn! The entrance, the way he came in, the way he was going to leave, hopefully sometime soon, because the dancing was making him dizzy, and now he was afraid he was going to tread on Nicky's toes.

Step, step, step, turn!

Benny.

'Mind if I cut in,' she said, not waiting for a reply either way.

Nicky managed the faintest protestation of pain as Benny prised her arms off Jason, shunting her to one side, grabbing Jason for herself.

Nicky lurked awkwardly to one side for a moment, mumbling a guilty greeting, before she announced to an audience that was not listening that she was off to check up on her mother. She tried to say something to Jason, but he had already step, step, step, turned away from her, dragged fiercely back towards the centre of the dance floor by Professor Summerfield.

'That was a bit abrupt,' said Jason. 'You could have waited until the next one. This one's almost over.'

'Do I need to put you on a lead?' hissed Benny.

'Promises, promises!'

'She's in a room full of Spacefleet officers,' said Benny. 'An excellent chance to become the proverbial good time had by all. There's no need for her to pounce on you.'

'She didn't pounce!'

'You men are so bloody stupid! I bet her mother put her up to it just to wind me up.'

'From what I hear, her mother couldn't put up much of anything.'

'So you're an expert now, are you?'

'She spends all her time looking after an old lady, and we just got to talking at the bar,' said Jason.

'And I bet you tried Jason Kane charm offensive forty-eight.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I bet you said you were a writer.'

'I might have mentioned it.'

'Of pervy pseudopod porn! Bet you didn't say that!'

'It didn't come up!'

'And neither did where you were planning on sleeping tonight either, did it?'

The waltz came to a halt with a flourish, causing a number of the dancers to separate and break into light applause. Not that there was a band anywhere nearby, but some people have their manners hard-wired. Of course, some people don't.

'I knew it,' said Benny, oblivious to the uniformed bodies pushing past and around them, exiting the dance floor. Over by the music alcove, a waiter was fumbling through a series of chips, looking for something somewhere in between a wedding Abbaddon and a funeral dirge.

'So what's it going to be, Benny? Am I in the way all the time, or am I forbidden to leave your side?'

'Don't you start,' said Benny. 'I've just had the third-degree from Grandma Misery over there in the corner. Apparently I am supposed to worry about everybody else's life apart from my own.'

'Welcome to my world,' said Jason.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'How it sounds. I'm your plus-one, not your bloody butler!'

'I never said you were!'

'So don't get the hump if I'm -'

'Off trying to get a hump of your own?'

It was a liminal moment for the dancers. Those who would dance regardless took their positions, oblivious, or at least politely unheeding of the spat playing out in the centre. Those who were pickier about their music clustered at the sides, seizing a swift drink or scanning the room for potential partners. Some had had enough, and retired to their tables. Some, like the demi-lemurs, paid the sudden silence no more heed than they had paid the music before it, lost in their own reminiscences and sorrows.

'You seemed pretty busy,' said Jason. 'Catching up on old times with everyone and his dog. This isn't a funeral, it's a bloody high-school reunion for you!'

'Don't act like that's my fault!' said Benny. 'What am I supposed to do, attend to your every need, morning, noon and sodding night? I'm not your wife any more!'

'So stop getting arsey just because I'm dancing with someone else!'

'That's not why I'm getting... arsey!'

'No, it isn't!' agreed Jason. 'You're behaving like an idiot, because for just ten minutes, handy old Jason, or Jake, or Mr Hatstand, or the guy who hangs around at the back, isn't carrying Benny's luggage, isn't listening to her whine about how she's "never been to me", and isn't riding shotgun at some dodgy party full of monkeys!'

‘Jason!’ said Benny, realising just how quiet everything had become around them.

Jason looked edgily around, finding himself to be the centre of attention. Nicky Kiyomoto busied herself with her mother in the wheelchair, conspicuously not looking over and meeting Benny’s eye.

A small family of Nivisi blinked nervously, their eyes trained on Benny like searchlights. The Hovans’ cheesecake sat, forgotten on their plates. And not a snuffle came from the group of demi-lemurs, all of whom stared in stony silence at the centre of the dance floor.

Closer to Benny and Jason, were a group Spacefleet officers, red-faced from the dancing, standing as silent witness. Over by the bar, the balding Admiral had got off his stool, and was striding purposefully towards them.

‘Sod you, then,’ said Jason quietly. ‘I’m going back to the room.’

‘Right,’ said Benny. ‘Fine.’

Jason spun around and stomped towards the exit, causing the Admiral to swerve to avoid him.

‘Is everything all right, here?’ he asked.

Hot-faced, but not quite tearful, trembling with anger at several reproaches and indignities she did not feel she deserved; very tired and most definitely emotional, time-lagged, with feet that were killing her and an ex-husband that was driving her mad; fobbed off by her oldest friend for indiscretions she never knew she had committed, and an abandonment of which she was unaware, almost passed over for a younger model who she’d previously thought was quite nice really; stuck on a planet where the weather was an oven with the lights on, and somehow obligated to ponce around a dig-site for a couple of weeks, all so she could go to the funeral of some guy she’d known for a couple of days a lifetime ago, whose friends and fellow demi-lemurs all looked at her like she was a clag-nut on their posterior fur, Benny had had enough.

She looked up into the Admiral’s eyes, seeing his silly little earpiece for monitoring the comms routines, and his row upon row of little medals for battles she’d never heard of against worlds she’d never know. Her frown deepened as she registered the name on his ID badge – nine little letters. On a day of reunions that were not quite happy, of a funeral that was not quite healing, and of wine that was not quite chilled any more, the Admiral and his crocodile concern was the final straw.

Benny had thought about this moment many times over twenty-five or so subjective years. She had worked out a whole series of routines and avengings to pursue, a whole catalogue of off-the-peg retorts and icy platitudes. All of which went straight out of the window after a very taxing couple of days.

‘Benny?’ said the Admiral.
Reader, she punched him.

The Ship of Painted Shadows

Marc Platt

This wasn't a luxury-class shuttle. The sort where they come round at three in the spacemorning with ice cream for passengers who can't sleep. Benny really fancied another chocolate and chilli, but the stewards had retreated behind their grey curtain and turned the cabin lights down to a sort of golden twilight.

They were two days out from Calliastra Highport and Benny was trying to sleep. Not much chance of that, but it did help defer updating her diary. You're slipping already, she told herself with a degree of lethargic satisfaction. So much for good resolutions.

According to her PDA, it was still over four hours before breakfast, which would be a greasy flaky roll with a squeeze of indeterminate jam and mug of old-fashioned mock coffee. She could hardly bear the excitement. She could barely even flex her toes, the seats were so crammed together. There were 167 different channels of in-flight entertainment available, but she had never been able to sleep with the helmet on, so she left it in its sterile wrapping under the seat. The nearest window was an aisle and four people away. Its shutter was pulled down. The two ecumenical Ardjian Scientists in the seats beside her were debating a theological point about their hermit deity who lived in an ocean trench on the planet DeepworldhimbilongGod.

They were just loud enough to keep her awake, but not loud enough to understand. Every thirty minutes or so, they tinkled a little bell and whispered prayers to thank their divine protector for safe passage across the unbelieving emptiness between the fortunate saved worlds.

Benny thanked the Goddess that she didn't have faith in anything much. Everyone was entitled to their beliefs, of course. Beliefs were good. They defined, built and destroyed the cultures she, as an eminent archaeologist, could go and dig up. Some beliefs said that all the different gods were just aspects of one big God. A sort of multifaceted super-diamond conglomerate with a long white beard.

She hypothesised that all the different gods got together sometimes for a big conference where they had cocktail parties and applauded or booed speeches about creationism, divine intervention and how to expand the commercial range of Acts of God that insurance corporations were such suckers for. Or they debated what came first, the chicken or the egg or the thought of the chicken or the egg? Or Light – it may be Good, but could it be Better? Or Cheaper?

Benny concluded that her head was getting silly. She just wanted to find somewhere quiet, shake the Jaiwanese dust off her boots and get a year's worth of tanglement out of her head. Not really to lose the tangle, just to straighten it out a bit. That was why she needed the

distance. *You can't see the dig for the pot shards* as the Martians used to say.

Only another six and a half hours before they reached Semulga Crossways where she would have to find another flight to take her closer to Earth. No direct route was available because the war was opening up new no-go zones all the time. Everything was getting diverted. Battered refugee carriers that creaked at the seams were clogging the spaceways. The spaceports were full of spindle-thin beggars, pawing at travellers for any handouts.

'We're on a cruise,' said the barrel-shaped woman. She had collided with Benny in the departure lounge at Calliastra Highport while they waited to board the shuttle. She had grafted eye shades and skin the colour of pearl. 'It's my trip of a lifetime. I'm taking my husbands.' The identical twin males seated between her and her mound of hand luggage smiled with meek indifference. They were blond, half her age and wore matching flowery vacation shirts. The name on the baggage labels was Montcalme. 'We're on *The Prince of Mercury*,' she added. 'Five-star deluxe class. Calling at Vishnu's Moon and the Barleysugar Cluster. We were supposed to be taking in the ziggurats on Jorion, but they've had to revise the trip to visit Proxima Xaynor instead. All because of this wretched war.'

'Xaynor's great,' said Benny. 'Just make sure you're on the jewel caves tour. There's a whole city down in the galleries, dating back way before the Great Expansion. Fantastic colonnades carved from growing crystal which have to be pruned back with chisels on a daily basis. The Xayn had this crazy social order based round their underground mushroom harvest. It's all defined by agricultural implements.'

'Goodness,' said Mrs Montcalme with a fixed smile, 'I'm afraid I don't really get on with mushrooms. Or rather they don't get on with me. My diet, you see. But I'm sure they'll find something exciting for us to do. You seem so knowledgeable, my dear. Do you dabble in archaeology?'

'I am an archaeologist,' said Benny, feeling slightly embarrassed for enthusing in public.

'Really. How fascinating.' There was an awkward pause. 'Well, we're looking forward to the on-board entertainment. The Prince is famous for its wonderful floor shows.' Another pause. Mrs Montcalme glanced at her sheepish husbands. 'I wonder when they are going to call our flight.'

That was what put the idea in Benny's head. If Mrs Montcalme's cruise was being diverted, then some passengers, who were more interested in the actual destinations than the sequined cabaret, might well have cancelled. If Benny could get as far as Proxima Xaynor, it

was only a short hop from there to Centauri and the hyperlink to Earth's moon.

She had to see Earth. It was her old homestead, yet she had never set foot there. She could read every textbook and see every vid about the homeworld, but there was no substitute for the seeing, touching, smelling experience. It would be like a plant digging up its own roots.

Goddess knows she had been to far obscurer worlds. But now with the Jaiwan work under her belt, she could hawk herself round the universities, drum up a bit of interest and get herself noticed. Surely that was better than the academic and dry reference she had found when she googled herself. *Bernice Surprise Summerfield, Archaeologist. Field Director on Jaiwan Project. Author, 'Pre-colonial Civilisation on Jaiwan'. Master of Science (Archaeology), Shawnee College, University of Jaiwan.* She wanted to be taken seriously, but maybe not that seriously. And there were other, more personal things to see. Places that appeared in old snapvids of Mum and Dad on beaches and in towns, together and with friends or earlier lovers, and which neither of her silly headstrong parents had bothered to identify before they both died. They had abandoned her, separately, under different circumstances, but far too close together, leaving a ton of unfinished business in their wake. Things, artefacts, even people, especially people, should be catalogued and labelled or they got lost forever.

That's why Benny should have been writing up her diary. But she was too tired. The scramble of emotion that had been Jaiwan was all catching up with her, bleaching out her thoughts. Amongst so much other stuff, excavating her own family wasn't what she'd planned to do. Yet on Jaiwan, she had lost friends of her own making, even taken the life of a so-called friend, so that the strange deep-rooted phenomenon called *Family* was something she wanted and needed to begin to unearth. Plus the last time she'd bared her soul in a diary, someone had used the journal against her, traded it – traded her – for his own freedom, the bastard. These things cost.

But if she found some excuse to procrastinate, she knew she wouldn't put up much of a fight.

When the shuttle finally docked at Semulga Crossways Spacejunction and Benny had got through customs scan, documentation scan and corporeal identity verification, she headed for the bookings desk dragging her bags behind her. She saw Mrs Montcalme and her luggage, which she guessed included the synchronised husbands, being ferried on a courtesy trolley towards the liner boarding lounge. There was scarcely enough room for the driver. Mrs Montcalme was too busy giving instructions to notice Benny, but one of the husbands, the one on the left, gave her a smile and a little wave as they disappeared through the gates.

There was a long queue for return bookings. Other more seasoned travellers than Benny had bet on the same idea. Part of the immense white prow of *The Prince of Mercury* filled the concourse windows. It was sleek and graceful, lined with portholes that amounted to fifteen floors of passenger cabins.

By the time Benny reached the head of the queue, there was only one berth left on the spaceliner. It was in a shared cabin with one of the staff. Not quite five-star luxury, but it was too good a chance to miss. When she asked the operative on the desk if there were any details about her bunkmate, she was given the name Ivo FitzIndri, a waiter on the liner's catering staff. Benny reckoned the name to be Terran, maybe half Irish, half Czech. He was probably volatile, but with more than a few good stories to tell. Waiters were notorious gossips. He'd be working the strangest hours, but he might bring home leftovers after the locusts had hit the buffet.

'I'll take it,' said Benny. She handed over her bags and declared the Ladygun given to her by Major Heidi Maputo, the buxom CO of the First Regiment of Combat Archaeologists. Teutonic Heidi, who would have looked equally at home carrying six foaming flagons of ale through a biergarten as she did wielding a trowel in a trench. The gun was wrapped in a printed scarf. The desk operative took it like any other valuable and popped it onto a separate conveyor for deposit in the Captain's inviolable safe. Benny put the receipt key in her jacket pocket.

'One thing about Mr FitzIndri,' said the operative who was being improbably helpful. 'There's a proviso on his special needs documentation. He insists on having the top bunk.'

'Fine by me,' said Benny. Released from the heavy shackles of her luggage at last, she went to find her way on board.

Benny's bags had already been delivered to the cabin. It was dingy and boxy, but it had its own bathroom. The walls were dull cream and scuffed and there was a strong earthy smell of musk. No one else was there. Ivo FitzIndri was obviously on duty in the restaurant.

The room was in the centre of the ship, so there was only a faux window, with faux curtains and a selection of programmable views.

Ivo had chosen a forest scene complete with sunlight dappling in the breeze and the occasional passing bird. Benny turned off the mute for a moment, taking in the birdsong and rustling of foliage. Not wanting to impose too much, she turned the mute on again.

If the cabin was too close to the air conditioning and the plumbing for Benny's liking, she had earplugs somewhere at the bottom of her bag and could cope. The plumbing might also explain the musky smell, but people who bought last-minute tickets couldn't be choosers.

Ivo's own bags were stacked in the corner, crowned by a pile of neatly folded white shirts. Rats, thought Benny, she was going to have to be tidy. She hoped he wouldn't be prissy too. She resisted her archaeologist's urge to investigate further. Sometimes she hated the way her powers of deduction always kicked in. 'Naturally inquisitive' was how she described herself on her CV, but everyone else said she was just plain noseey.

The sheets from the top bunk were also folded and stacked in the corner. Scattered on the otherwise bare mattress were leaves, both dried and green. Somehow they connected with the picture on the window. Benny started to wonder what she had let herself in for.

She opened the bunkside drawers and found that the usual stash of religious paraphernalia prevalent in all good hotel rooms extended to the staff quarters too. A separate item in each drawer: the Koran, a Gideon Bible, an illuminated scroll of Ardjian Science that actually lit up when you touched it, a string of Nynkyx worry bones, a plastic figurine of the Goddess herself and a snake which made her jump until she realised that it was dried. In the last drawer was a bunch of bananas which she doubted had any religious significance. But she could be wrong.

She decided not to unpack after all. Instead she locked the door and got into the shower. There were still traces of sand and dust from Jaiwan sluicing around her feet. How could that stuff be so endlessly ingrained? It was as if the planet was reluctant to let her go. As she towelled herself down, she noticed a silver chain on the side of the washbasin. A little circular disc was attached to the chain. It was engraved with an image of branching spokes that could have been the

cross section of a tree seen from above. On the reverse was the legend 'Home of the Half Dead'. Is everyone out here homesick? she thought. Even the Half Dead, whoever they are. No, some of us take home with us. Or make a new home and try to forget the old home home. She realised she already missed Jaiwan.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon,' called a voice from the main room. Benny pulled up her towel and darted back through.

There was a man in uniform looking through the window at her. Then she remembered she was looking at a screen.

'Hi, I'm your Captain, Ferenc Sezheremy and, on behalf of the crew, I'd like to welcome you all aboard the Solarfleet luxury cruise liner The Prince of Mercury and to wish you all a truly happy voyage.' Does he have to talk to me like I'm an idiot? thought Benny. Or was this just aimed at the majority of the passengers? She couldn't find an alternative option welcome speech for intelligent people, so she got dressed while the Captain droned on in his frighteningly cheerful way. 'All access bridges have been disengaged and we'll shortly be on our way. Once we're clear of Semulga Station, we'll be taking a course round Outer Semulga itself and then on past the inner worlds to view the spectacular flares from the Semulgan sun, which are particularly fine at this time of year.'

To her annoyance, Benny found that the Captain's message overrode the mute control. Apparently it was a compulsory penance for coming on board at all. She prayed he didn't deliver updates on a daily basis.

'Then we'll be saying farewell to Semulga as our voyage of discovery really begins and we start our run-up to light speed times three en route to our first port of call at Vishnu's Moon in one spaceday's time.' A series of ads started up showing the huge range of leisure activities available on board.

That was enough. Benny found a slightly battered postcard of Crystal Peak on Jaiwan in her bag and scribbled a friendly note introducing herself to Ivo. Bernice, archaeology, hoping not to be in the way, that sort of thing. She laid it against the faux window, grabbed her hold-all and fled the cabin.

The corridors were deserted. They had that certain deadness of hotel passages – even deader than the rooms. Not lived in, just passed through. As she headed up the stairs to the observation decks, a gentle thrumming started in the walls. The ship was on the move.

She turned a corner in a rush and nearly collided with an autotrolley piled with lacquered boxes. She was almost pinned to the wall as it passed. The cases bore labels in Terran Japanese script. The lid of one was loose and a swatch of purple silk stuck out like a tongue etched with silver filigree. Behind the trolley glided a tall Japanese woman with piled black hair. She wore a kimono patterned with gold

chrysanthemums and trimmed with crimson. It was bound at the waist by a pink sash that emphasised her height. Her face was powdered white and her eyebrows painted grey in thin fearsome arches. She bowed her head to Benny as she passed, but the gesture was condescending rather than courteous. Her eyes were cold. Her slightly exaggerated grace was so different from the self-absorbed waddling of Mrs Montcalme.

It took several minutes to find an observation deck which was not packed out. All galactic life seemed to be on board and most of it seemed ready to party. Benny eventually jostled a place on a lower level viewing gallery. The quays of Semulga Crossways were sliding past, smooth as chocolate without the chilli. The passengers were waving, but no one waved back. The observation platforms on the space station were a dark mass of refugees from the war. They stared out at The Prince of Mercury, an embodiment of wealth and privilege.

Benny felt embarrassed. Not me, she thought, I don't belong here. I just grabbed the first place that came along. I'm not even in an economy-class cabin. I'm with the workers. But the other thought that stuck a pin in her balloon was that at least she had a home to retreat to. Somewhere. If she could get the connections.

The hard-lit beauty of the station gave way to the blackness of space. Benny was on the wrong side of the liner to see the red-brown planet of Outer Semulga which they were temporarily circling. She buried any old-fashioned socialist ideals and went to find food.

The liner was in every way a moving town with a full range of facilities designed to make travellers feel at home. Benny accessed a wall terminal and studied a list of the various eateries on board. She decided to treat herself and eat upmarket, even if her accommodation was at the goat kebab end of the food chain.

On her way up to the five star Crow's Nest Restaurant, she passed the five-star sun deck (artificial obviously) and the five-star sauna parlour, both of which were already filled with LBLs (Lavender-Based Lifeforms) intent on the serious business of getting their credit's worth.

Through the window of the five-star gym, she saw that there was already an array of people working out, not all of them human. In a glass-fronted grav-free tank, both of Mrs Montcalme's husbands, trim in matching blue shorts, were swimming in the air. They both moved and turned in perfect unison like an unwanted manifestation of double vision. They both saw her at the same moment. Both waved identical waves and smiled twin smiles. She waved back, both hands, and started to feel welcome.

Amongst an array of posters for the liner's star-spangled live entertainments, Benny spotted faded bouffant crooner Brad Caramel, a

one-time favourite of her Mum, who was headlining the floor show at the Crow's Nest. Good grief! Dad used to cringe when Brad Caramel guested on the golden oldies variety channel show. Benny thought that the sad old *chanteur*, with his applied tan and applied youth, had been dead for years, or was that just wishful thinking?

Actually, that was a lie, she hadn't thought about him at all, not since Mum died, and that was over ten years ago. But even Mum had laughed when they discovered that Brad's real name was Erik Inkerstrom. From his poster, he seemed younger and his hair was more greasily luxuriant than she recalled. She reminded herself that it was still early evening. With luck, she could eat and get out before the floor show started.

In the other venues, there were one-day courses on *Old-fashioned Cuisine*, *Tchorsazun*, *Yoga of the Mind and Earth: Myth or Memory?* There was also a run of concerts in the St Attenborough Conference Hall by The New Gondwana Ladies' Glee Choir. Benny decided that writing her diary might be unavoidable after all.

The queue outside the Crow's Nest Restaurant was longer than expected. She guessed everyone else was in a rush to miss Brad Caramel too. Beyond the diners at their tables, a sculpted sea of red dust was moving slowly across the far windows like an old-style painted theatrical backdrop. The busy diners ignored the surface of Outer Semulga. Benny turned her attention to watching the waiters, immaculate in their penguin suits, trying to spot which one Ivo might be. In fact, two waiters actually were penguinoids with polished beaks held high, sashaying between the tables, balancing trays above their heads on flippery hands. There was also a darkly handsome humanoid waiter who Benny really wanted to be Ivo. But when she thought about it, the leaf-strewn upper bunk fixation didn't quite go with this bow-tied Adonis.

'Good evening, mademoiselle? May I have your cabin number please?' A receptionist waiter was studying her with slippery charm.

He was a Mapravalarian with a face like a reptilian owl and grey, grey eyes.

Benny fumbled in her bag. 'Got my key here.'

He studied the card she gave him, his charm visibly freezing over as she watched. 'I am sorry, mademoiselle, but we do not serve Solarfleet employees in this restaurant. Only fully paying passengers.'

'What?' said Benny. 'No, look you don't understand. I just got a last-minute ticket. This room's all that was left.'

'I'm sorry, mademoiselle.' He handed the card back. 'But it doesn't entitle you to dine here. Perhaps I could recommend the kwikdine outlets on the lower decks. Or the staff canteen.'

Benny found herself turning away obediently. As she walked back

past the disdain of the rest of the queue, she felt herself go hot with anger. She'd had stand-up rows with military elite and government agents. She'd had fights to the death with jumbo-sized underwater spiders. She'd even stood up to her own father – just about. Yet this jumped-up, oleaginous plate-waver had told her to go away and she'd done as she was told on the double. Knowing her luck, he would turn out to be Ivo. She was so angry she could have kicked herself.

She reassured herself that Ivo would have recognised his own cabin number. She bought a magenta soyshake from an outlet by the gym and headed back down to her room to sulk. After several flights of stairs she turned along a passage and suddenly there was plusher carpet and the lighting was subdued. She'd got the wrong floor. A sign pointed her towards Deluxe Apartments 1-3. That was when she gave her nosiness its head. She was up for a fight and didn't care. The Captain could only put her off at Vishnu's Moon and even that was a step closer to home.

She pushed on, determined to see what she was missing. The gloom seemed to deepen as she approached the end of the passage.

The door was slightly ajar. Through the gap Benny could see the stack of lacquered boxes that had nearly mown her down earlier. The door opened inwards by itself and the glinting black boxes lured her in. She couldn't resist. To discover something that wasn't caked in mud or dust or at the bottom of a latrine was like a new experience.

It was dark in the apartment, the only illumination came from the passage. She reached out and touched the tongue of silk that still protruded from one of the boxes. It was soft as gossamer.

A shadow flitted across the light and Benny jumped like a schoolgirl caught stealing sweets. There was no one there. Idiot, she thought. It was only a moth or a momentary dip in the power. Just leave now.

She turned round and jumped again.

A row of little people were standing behind her, waist high, dressed in amazing clothes and staring accusingly. 'Sorry. I was lost,' she blurted, breaking into an cold sweat.

The little people did not move. Benny took a step forward. There were at least a dozen of them standing in open display cabinets. Even in the half light, she could make out that their puppet faces were painted and their hands were wooden. Their clothes were Japanese in style, intricate and rich in colours. Benny's mother had kept a book of old prints which Benny had treasured when she was little.

Japanese lords and ladies in extravagant robes and kimonos. Samurai warriors and snarling demons. Tiny boats tossed under monstrous waves. Willow trees and bridges, cherry blossom and lovers turned to bluebirds. And these little figures were straight out of that fairy-tale world. Benny was entranced. She wanted to touch and play.

Metal rang behind her. Shadows darted on the far wall. She turned and a warrior came at her, his thin sword raised above its topknot.

She flung up an arm to protect herself and felt a slight pain. She was knocked backwards. Her head clunked against the cases before she hit the floor.

There was a soft scramble of footsteps. Benny was clutching her head, crawling on her hands and knees, trying to shake her senses down into some sort of order. There seemed to be a bridge ahead of her which crossed a gully of dark shadow. And at the end of the bridge was a striped curtain of green, purple and red, which swished open to reveal a line of white screens that slid aside to reveal white screens, that slid aside to reveal white screens, and more white screens beyond them.

The darkness swam back through Benny's head. She reached out and touched something that was soft. It squirmed and she snatched her hand back in fright.

'Intruder,' whined a high, fluted voice.

A pair of white-stockinged feet were protruding from beneath a red-trimmed robe. The gold-kimonoed woman from the passage was standing over Benny. She was half in darkness, yet Benny could still feel the stare of those black eyes.

'This is a private apartment. Were you invited in? I think not.' Her voice was almost strangled with a bizarre singsong exaggeration.

'Sorry,' croaked Benny. 'Someone came at me. It was dark.'

The woman made no attempt to help Benny up. Her ice-white face showed no anger. There was no need. Her imperious presence was quite enough. Her arm swept up, her hand turned to and fro, almost stroking the air. 'The rooms are private. No intruders. And you are a thief.'

'Sorry,' Benny mouthed again, struggling to her feet. 'The door was open. I did knock. I'm the maid. I came to turn down the beds.' She tried to smile and bow at the same time.

The woman plainly didn't believe a word of it. 'I am Iwafuji,' she announced. 'The household is mine to keep. Untrained, ill-mannered country-girls are not engaged. And you are still wearing your shoes!'

Suddenly her rage knew no bounds. Her voice went from growl to shriek. 'How dare you enter and show so little respect! Get out. Get out!'

'Fine. Sorry. Thank you.' Benny backed out of the door, pausing for one more hurried bow before she went. She saw Iwafuji shiver the edge of her kimono as if to shake off the dust brought in by this unwelcome interloper.

The door slammed and Benny stumbled for freedom. It seemed bright in the passage. The liner's power must be back on full again.

She reached the stairs and leaned against the wall trying to breathe some sanity back into her life. Her heart was racing. Her head hurt where it had struck the cases and she suddenly noticed the wetness on her arm. Her sleeve had been torn. The thin sword of the samurai had sliced cleanly through the fabric. It was trimmed with red, where she was bleeding.

It was *Her*, she kept thinking. *Her!*

One of the puppets on the line, the figure of a thin haughty woman, had been wearing a kimono patterned with gold chrysanthemums and trimmed with red.

The puppet was identical to Iwafuji, keeper of the household.

The cabin was as Benny had left it. There was still no sign of Ivo FitzIndri, which was a relief because she had no desire to talk to anyone. She peeled off her shirt and studied the cut on her arm. The bleeding had stopped, but the dried blood reached as far as her wrist. She washed the wound and wrapped a handkerchief round it. Then she put on a clean shirt and slumped into the chair in front of the window. She was overtired and her head was racing. Someone could have killed her. It seemed to have become an almost daily occurrence. She tried to convince herself that a skilled samurai could easily have finished her if he'd wanted to. This was probably meant as a warning. And that meant that he and the Housekeeper had things to hide. She got out her diary and old-fashioned fountain pen at last and sat and looked at the blank page. Any number of ideas swilled around her head, but she couldn't pin any of them to the paper.

'Just keep your nose out of other people's business,' she heard her father say in his familiar, controlled, yet exasperated tone. It was a lesson she had wilfully ignored ever since.

There had been a bad day once when Little Benny, aged eight, had gone rifling through an attache case belonging to her father, the Admiral Isaac Summerfield. It was the Naval Fleet Review and they were on board the Troop Carrier Cadmus anchored off Mars. Dad was in conference with a dozen other admirals. Mum was entertaining the other admirals' other halves. The attache case had been left in his office and Little Benny, who more or less had the run of the place, just got nosey. She sifted through various documents, tried to open a compartment inside the lid and set off what felt like every alarm on the Carrier.

Within a minute the office was surrounded by naval ratings toting primed handguns. They thought they'd caught an alien agent.

Benny had hysterics.

The Admiral, exhibiting his usual cold buttoned-up anger, didn't even intervene when Benny had her eye print and a DNA swab taken.

'She has to learn,' he said pulling her away from Mum's skirt.

Nothing, not even his errant daughter, could interrupt Naval security procedure. No preferences accepted.

And later on, after she'd been banished to bed in disgrace, she heard Dad and several other admirals laughing about it over post-prandial brandy and cigars. They weren't laughing about you, darling,' said Mum later. But they were. Benny knew they were. She hated cigar smoke. It always brought back the sound of alarms and thundering boots.

She started awake in the chair, her untouched diary in her lap. Her head still hurt and her mouth felt like she'd been chewing the Jaiwan desert. As her senses clumped back into focus, she realised that the window had been turned off. The postcard she'd placed against it had been moved. She swivelled round and saw a hummock in the top bunk. Ivo was back and she'd been dead to the universe. He had already gone to bed and pulled a sheet right over him.

She decided to crawl into her bunk too with the minimum of noise.

But it's always the way when you try to move quietly; she slid out of the chair and the book slapped to the floor.

The Ivo hummock didn't move. Benny studied the shape with a degree of mounting frustration. Oh, be like that then, she thought.

Don't talk to me. I'm the nosey one who invades everyone's space.

And then she saw a pair of eyes watching her from under a lift in the sheet. They were oval eyes like glassy brown eggs. Not human eyes at all.

'Hi,' she said, awkwardly clapping her hands together and grinning.

'I'm Bernice... Benny... but you probably already worked that out.'

The eyes were wide with astonishment, or it could have been wonder. They were sad eyes too. And incredibly beautiful.

The sheet slipped back slowly to reveal a face that almost stopped Benny's heart. His dark features were gentle and inquisitive. His nose was almost dog-like as it tapered to a pair of wet nostrils, yet his mouth and chin were definitely human. But what set it off, what made it extraordinary, was the ring of luxurious white fur that crowned his head and ran down under his throat. He lay flat out, his chin resting on the mattress, the way his ancestors, who must have been related to something like lemurs, would have lain along a branch.

He yawned and displayed a full set of sharp canines. 'Please forgive me if I woke you,' he said. 'I'm Ivo.' He smiled shyly.

'Yeah, I figured that,' said Benny, so entranced by his appearance that the fact he was speaking her language just sailed past her. The ruff of fur somehow ennobled him. He could have passed as an ambassador or a dandy at some medieval court. She was fantasising of course. Ancient history was her stomping ground, although her knowledge favoured a range of other planets rather than her own.

Even so, her job required a degree of expertise on the home front.

Martian development was the gold standard against which other planets were compared, but it was Earth that the audience related to.

Benny knew how history could be written by the victors and contradicted by what she dug up. Truth had to be uncovered with the softest of brushes. It was always down to Earth with a clunk. That's why there was still room in her head for the romantic, not just the accurate, boring or politically lethal. As it was, Ivo wasn't human

anyway, so no medieval panoply and chivalry for him. He landed up as a waiter. As if to prove it, he lifted his head and she saw he was wearing a white shirt and bow tie. 'Hello, Ivo,' she finally said and then remembered she'd done introductions already.

'Hello, Bernice the archaeologist,' he responded.

'It's Benny,' she said. 'You haven't changed. Out of your work gear, I mean.'

He sniffed. A hand with dark spindly fingers appeared out of the sheet and wiped his nose. 'Sorry,' he said.

'Not cos of me?' she worried. 'You can't sleep like that.'

Ivo wriggled uncomfortably. 'Didn't want to wake you. And I was... I mean, I wasn't...' He floundered for words and closed his huge eyes.

Benny felt a huge affection welling up inside her. 'Were you embarrassed? Oh no, look, go and change in the bathroom. Or I'll go in the bathroom.'

He cocked his head on one side and stared at her arm. 'Are you hurt? You're bleeding.'

She turned away from him. 'I tripped over. It's okay. I'm just clumsy.' The cut had reopened and was seeping blood through the material of her clean shirt.

He was down from the bunk and beside her in a second. Leaves fluttered down in his wake. Despite his waiter's clothes, the sheet was still furled round him like a cloak. He was shorter than she expected, slightly shorter than her with a bit of a stoop, either from his ancestry or from carrying too many dinner plates. The scent of musk grew stronger.

She let him untie the handkerchief with his spindly fingers, not quite sure whether to flinch or make a joke, but he worked with such gentle precision that it was hardly threatening at all. There was a fine growth of soft fur on his arms too. He sniffed at the wound. She thought for a moment he might lick it. 'It's a clean cut. Not infected,' he said. 'I'm sorry I didn't notice before. Are you sure you fell? This looks like it was done by a sharp knife.'

'Don't worry, please,' she said, but he was already leading her into the bathroom. To her shame, she saw flecks of blood on the basin where she'd first washed the cut. 'I can do it myself,' she insisted and started to splash the wound with water. Ivo rooted through a washbag and produced a small blue strip of surgical plaster. He dabbed her arm dry with a towel and then fixed the plaster in place.

'Blue catering stock. You're lucky you're fully human. If it was me, I'd have to be shaved.'

'Right,' Benny said. 'This'll be fine really. Sorry to be a nuisance.'

They went back to the other room and since Ivo insisted he wasn't tired and Benny's internal clock was still half on Jaiwan Standard

Time and half shot to pieces, they sat and talked. Or rather he talked and she ate the bananas he produced from the drawer. He sat hunched on a chair, his feet up on the seat. His long arms hugged his long legs and his knees went up past his chin.

‘Ever been to Earth?’ he asked. It was a reasonable question since plenty of humans hadn’t. ‘My greatest grandmother’s ancestors, the branches rest their souls, come from Malagascar. Have you heard of it? And my great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather’s family, they came from Portugal. That’s part of Europe.’

‘So you are a lemur,’ said Benny.

‘Demi... well, demi-demi-demi-etcetera-lemur. It goes on like that, but we don’t have all spacenight. I’m mixed race. It’s a long story.’

Benny folded up her banana skin and dropped it in the bin. ‘I’m game,’ she said, ‘as long as it doesn’t mess up your duties.’

He shifted uneasily and shrugged his back as if something was irritating him.

‘It’s no good. I’ll have to go for this.’

He turned and took a flying leap at the top bunk, the sheet billowing behind him. Once there, he perched on the edge and reached behind his back, scrabbling at his shirt with his fingers. He gave a sigh of relief as a long white furry tail unrolled and flopped over the side.

‘Sorry, but that’s so much more comfortable. I have to strap it up because it worries the passengers when I’m serving food.’

‘But it’s lovely,’ said Benny, just about resisting a need to stroke it.

‘Is it?’ he seemed surprised. ‘It means I’m not a true Indri. That side of the family never had tails. I’m just a FitzIndri. More mixed up than a bowl of fruit salad.’

‘You’re not into racial purity then?’ said Benny.

Ivo shrugged. ‘You have to survive, don’t you? And when you don’t have a home...’

Benny nodded and helped herself to another banana.

‘Madagascar?’

‘*Malagascar*,’ he said. ‘The humans got it wrong. And they burned our forests for crop-growing land.’

‘Ah, let me guess. Slash and burn. And the crop land was only good for five years.’

‘Two years,’ he said. ‘After that it went to dust. So then they slashed and burned some more. And soon our immeasurable forest home was down to countable numbers of trees. We had to change or die. Or our lost spirits would be left dwelling among the ghosts of the branches. That’s what *Lemur* means: from the Roman *Lemures*.’

He sniffled and wiped his nose on a leaf from the bed.

‘*Lemures*,’ said Benny. ‘The spirits of the dead.’ She noticed that Ivo

had put the silver chain with the little tree medallion round his neck.

He kept fingering it as if it was a comforter.

‘That’s why we forsook our old ways. We consorted with the Malagasy, the people who burned down our world. We sacrificed our old lives to survive, so that the Dead might live on. Except that it wasn’t a sacrifice at all. There was nothing left to sacrifice. It was just a down payment on the future. The Demi-Lemur must never forget the Dead.’

‘Half lemur, half dead?’ Benny said, watching him finger the medallion with its Half Dead inscription. And then she worried she might have gone too far.

To her relief, he smiled. ‘Now who’s being morbid? Half dead is half alive too. And you’d better watch it. Don’t forget I’m demi-demi-demi-etccetera human too.’

‘Then why are you out here?’ asked Benny. ‘You’re a long way from home.’

His dark febrile toes curled over the edge of the bunk. ‘My Order gave me my learning and sent me out.’ He held up the medallion. ‘I’m a brother of the Order of Lost Lemuroidea. It’s somewhere to belong. That’s why they sent me away.’

‘I’m getting lost,’ said Benny. He didn’t look like a monk to her. He had no cowl or sandals. ‘They give you a home and then send you away.’

He reached a long arm down and fished the remote off the bunkside cabinet. The picture of the forest flickered up on the window. ‘To find a new home for all of us. The Order still has a tree temple at Andasibe on Malagascar, but that’s all there is. It’s the last retreat. Poor old, sad old Earth’s not really home any more. The Order is who I belong to, but it goes with me.’

‘Even as a waiter?’

He shrugged his rounded shoulders. ‘It keeps me in bananas.’ He yawned again. ‘Must sleep now. Early shift tomorrow.’

‘Which restaurant are you in?’ asked Benny. ‘I tried in the Crow’s Nest, but they wouldn’t even let me through the door. Seems I’m not on an exclusive enough ticket.’

Ivo sighed. ‘They’re like that. They need rules to run a big complicated bird like this liner. But I’m rarely in the restaurants. I’m on cabin service.’ He frowned. ‘Have you eaten today?’

‘I’ve eaten your bananas. But it’s fine. I’ll get something in the morning.’

‘And your arm?’

There were things she didn’t want to talk about. ‘It’s fine really. Just an accident.’

‘Good,’ he said. He flicked the forest off the window. Then he curled

up in his shirt and trousers and pulled the sheet over himself.

As Benny climbed onto her own lower bunk, his voice came from above her. 'Bernice?'

'Benny please.'

'I'm really glad you're here.' His tail swished momentarily past her nose. 'Feels like you belong.'

'Thanks. Night night.'

The lights went down and she fell instantly asleep, dreaming of tall, strange-shaped trees that swayed in an impossible dance, hopping on their fat trunks like tall brown jellies on the orange-red earth. And overhead, the sky was striped from horizon to horizon in broad bands of red and purple and green.

When she woke up, her first instinct was to check the time. The PDA on her wrist was dead. Its screen was empty and its buttons were unresponsive. Typical, she thought. Somewhere on this ship there must be someone who would take an expensive look at it. She flicked on the window screen and saw that it was nearly midday liner time and she had slept for eleven hours. Ivo had gone to work.

Her arm still stung, but she dressed herself and went out to look for food. The smell of soya bacon drew her inexorably to an outlet with the sign *The Cafe of Good Hope*. She sat at a table and ordered the full Earth-style breakfast. Prunes, orange juice, bacon, egg, sausage, tomato with chilli, saute potatoes, croissant and a bucket of coffee.

The blue-haired waitress, almost a juvenile, took Benny's key card, tried to swipe it twice and said, 'Sorry, ma'am, but according to this, you don't exist.'

‘How do you think I got the sodding cabin key then?’ Benny wanted to scream with frustration. ‘And what about my credit? I’ve just had a bonus paid into my account. Someone could be out there now, spending it for me and I’d never know!’

‘*Miss Summerfield.*’ The head of ship security had fat wrists and sang out Benny’s name with patronising contempt. His name was Jeffrey O’Coral and he was sitting across the desk from her with a uniformed officer in attendance. Other than his thick wrists, he was passably slim, and looked no more than twenty. ‘None of your biometric IDs are recognised. All the referees you’ve given us – your credit fund, your bank, your so-called previous employers on Jaiwan, your Academy – they all deny any knowledge of your existence.’

‘You haven’t tried. You keep telling me that, but you can’t have tried.’ She’d had an hour of this upstart already and the argument just went round and round. The most irritating thing was that Jeffrey O’Coral didn’t seem bored at all.

‘What are we expected to do?’ he said blithely. ‘No one knows you. The memory on your PDA has “conveniently” been wiped.’

‘I don’t know how that happened,’ began Benny again, but Mr O’Coral held up a hand.

‘It seems that your presence on this ship is a fraud. And under powers granted by the current wartime resolutions...’

‘Oh, right. So you now think I’m a spy.’

‘You might be.’ He darted a look at the officer beside him. ‘Or a freeloader. Or a weapons trafficker. Or a refugee.’

‘Is that what I look like?’ She tried to remember exactly what she was wearing without looking. She decided that since they hadn’t mentioned it, she’d keep quiet about the Ladygun deposited in the liner’s safe.

‘I have the safety of three thousand passengers to think of.’

‘And I’m one of them! What about *my* safety? If your systems don’t recognise me, how did I get a ticket in the first place?’

‘You tell me. You’ll be handed over to the port authority at Vishnu’s Moon. Take it up with them.’

That was it. She slammed a fist down on his desk. ‘Where’s the Captain of this liner? I want to see the Captain now!’ The assistant officer’s hand went inside his jacket.

‘Captain Sezheremy is not available at the moment,’ said Mr O’Coral quickly.

‘I bet he isn’t,’ Benny snapped. She stared at the floor desperately searching for another defence. ‘Google me. Go on. I’m there. Bernice

Surprise Summerfield. Freelance Archaeologist.'

'You don't exist. No one knows you.'

'Hang on, hang on.' She was pushing down the air with her palms, trying to calm herself. 'Who exactly have you spoken to?'

'I've told you.'

'No, no, no. People! You can't actually have spoken to people. All you've spoken to are a load of on-board localised data repositories. Yes? I'm right, aren't I? And they can't be updated until we drop out of superlight and reach the next terminus.'

'Miss Summerfield...'

'Suppose there's a systems glitch? Or someone's tampered with the database hub? How would you know? Have you run a systems check?'

The attendant officer's earcom blipped. 'Yeah?' he said. 'Yeah. Yeah, right.' He leant down and muttered in Jeffrey O'Coral's ear.

The head of security frowned. 'The restaurant?' he said flatly. He flicked at his on-desk screen and studied the data.

Benny watched his mounting irritation. His eyes kept darting to her and back to the screen again. It was a sudden crack in his smarmy armour. Then he smoothed out a cold empty smile. 'Well, I gather some sort of apology is in order.'

She simply raised an eyebrow while he floundered.

'It seems there's no trace of the actual berth you were allocated either.' He cleared a sudden dryness in his throat. 'Apparently it's dropped off the system.'

'And my booking went with it,' she said, resisting her almost insurmountable need to crow out loud. 'And all of my records?'

He nodded. 'Yes, it would seem so.'

'How nice to know I still exist.'

'Ah,' he said and a tiny bit of confidence edged back under his frozen smile. 'That may not be quite the case. Solarfleet Lines are naturally delighted to accept that your booking was valid and wish to apologise for any inconvenience caused by a serious malfunction with the database. Unfortunately due to the fact that none of your credit ratings can be verified until we make portfall at Proxima Xaynor...'

'What?' said Benny.

'...we have to regard you as a non-paying passenger.'

'You're making me a liability!' exploded Benny. 'Your sodding system screws up my booking and my credit, and you call me a liability!'

Jeffrey O'Coral leant back into his smug little chair and recited. 'Passengers employ credit funds at their own risk. Solarfleet Lines cannot be held responsible for the loss of passengers' personal property.'

'You are kidding me!'

‘It’s tiresome,’ he agreed. ‘But there you are. It’s in our passengers’ charter. In the circumstances, we are of course able to offer you the continued use of your current berth for the course of the voyage. And we will be delighted to provide you with a daily meal in the staff canteen.’

By the time you’re thirty, Benny thought, with fat wrists like those, you’ll be as big as Mrs Montcalme.

‘One meal a day!’ She was still fuming. ‘I’m on staff rates. That’s what he said. Smarmy little creep. I’ve seen king-sized frogs with less slime!’

‘But you still have a berth,’ said Ivo. That’s good, isn’t it?’ He was sitting on his perch on the top bunk while she stomped about the room. He had a bunch of long-stemmed flowers with him. The blooms were faded, rescued from a display in one of the restaurants, and he was picking off the leaves for his bed.

Benny had stopped ranting and stared at him. ‘It was you, wasn’t it? You sorted it for me. That creep of O’Coral said something about restaurants.’

He shrugged. ‘When I heard what happened, I got our credit cashier to run a check on the system. You weren’t there at all. But neither was this berth. Our cabin was only half a room. And I knew you were real because you’d snored for most of the night.’

She felt humbled. ‘Ivo... Oh look, I’ve been terrible. Thank you. It’s good to have a friend in high places.’

‘Did you want the top bunk?’ he asked. ‘You only had to say.’

‘No!’ She tried to calm herself again. ‘No, honestly. You really rescued me, you know. I could have landed up in a holding cell on Vishnu’s Moon. Waiting for the local mission to come and pick up the homeless vagrant archaeologist. At least I’ve got a bed for the rest of the trip.’

‘So you can relax now,’ he said, but that didn’t stop her from pacing the room.

‘That’s a joke.’

‘At least try not to worry.’

‘It wasn’t a glitch, Ivo. The system was deliberately tampered with. Someone’s got it in for me and I bet you a bag of Mung beans I know who it was.’

He sighed. ‘You must be starved. I’ll take you for an early dinner and show you the canteen. I’ve a work break at half four. Meet me in the main lobby by the souvenir shop. Don’t be late.’

After Ivo had gone, Benny sat in the cabin, flicking round the scapes on the window. Hidden among the selection of anodyne views was a fly-by shot of the spiral craters of Vishnu’s Moon. This particular

unexplained phenomenon had always been a bone of scientific contention.

There were always new theories, especially in the silly season between academic years. 'Always keep a new conjecture about Vishnu's Moon in the bottom of your bag for a rainy day,' said one of Benny's more media-minded tutors. Several failing academic careers had been rescued by such timely and well-publicised unveilings. Her own theory was that the coiled shapes had been formed when a family of gynagerously enormous ammonites had keeled over and disintegrated, leaving only the vast imprints of their curlicue shells on the powder-blue landscape. Groups of tiny, tiny suited-up figures, probably media academics with their own documentary production teams, were just visible as specks tramping about inside the dips.

The fly-by shot only lasted about two minutes before looping round again. Benny felt cheated. She bet that paying passengers had all the on-ship vid channels.

She soon got bored with being bored. There was still an hour before she had to meet Ivo so, against her better judgement, she went out to explore again. She headed for the observation decks, hurrying past the floor that held the Deluxe Apartments.

The lack of crowds calmed her jangling nerves. She found an empty viewing gallery and gazed out through the huge portal across the great ravine of space. It made her feel so overwhelmingly small and irrelevant that her hurt didn't matter any more. She tried to pick out individual stars without resorting to the information overlay facility, but that wasn't so easy. She'd got used to the constellations in the Jaiwan sky. Anyway, constellations are a matter of perspective, changing shape and silly name as you move from system to system.

It was something the travel consortiums had inevitably picked up on.

Travel to Earth to see Orion's Belt and Travel to Orion to see Earth's Braces.

Benny assumed someone thought that was funny.

She slumped into one of the deckchairs, so tired that her head started to nod almost immediately. As she dozed, she was gradually aware of singing echoing up from somewhere inside the liner. A distant chorus of unaccompanied female voices was rising and falling in a jaunty old-time madrigal. The words sounded like *Woo-hoo*, go okey-dokey. It provided an unexpected, yet not inappropriate, commentary to the vast star-sprinkled darkness before her.

Left urn, right urn. On a roundabout. As the music chuntered on, she felt the liner's engines change their pulsing. The stars started to swing aside as the ship turned. *Woo-hoo*, go *okey-dokey*. As if summoned, a blue crescent slid into view. Vishnu's Moon, a moon without a planet,

a milky sapphire composed of cobalt dust.

Ersatz Wanda's all about. Oi! The singing stopped with the shout and a cascade of tinkling laughter. The song must be Jewish in origin, thought Benny. That Oi was a dead giveaway. She squinted at the approaching planetoid, trying to spot Vishnu's Curlers, but the liner was on an approach from the dark side and there was little to see. At least she was not going to be incarcerated on the customs post down there.

A sudden finger of cold traced her neck. She shivered and turned.

No one was there. She heard a swish of silk, but there was only her shadow thrown by the moonlight on the wall among the angular shades of the deckchairs. Yet there had been a presence, she was sure.

She hurried out of the galleries, feeling distinctly wobbly, and headed towards the main lobby. There were only five minutes before she was due to meet Ivo. People were emerging from their cabins after a post-lunch nap. It would soon be time for a pre-dinner drink.

Most of the passengers felt the need to wear beach gear, asserting their holiday status regardless of whether there was a beach or not.

The way to the main lobby was suddenly packed. A crowd of passengers was standing, jostling, trying to get a better view, but no one seemed to know what they were supposed to be seeing.

'Performance event,' said one. 'Fire drill?' suggested another.

From the lobby ahead, came the slow twanging of a plucked instrument. It was exotic, mystical, enticing. Whatever it was.

'Benny,' muttered a voice behind her. Ivo was at her shoulder.

'There's a better view round this way.' They slipped out of the crowd and he opened a door marked STAFF ONLY. That's okay, she thought.

Treat me like staff, I'll do staff things.

Ivo gangled along in his waiter's suit, leading her down a passage past stacks of crates and barrels and a row of the ship's fluffers.

'What is it?' she called.

'Dunno,' he said. 'Nothing's scheduled. Could be one of the show groups, drumming up an audience. That'll annoy the pursers.' And he grinned.

Benny noticed that his tail was not visible, so it must be strapped up inside his shirt. She thought that was rather sad.

He opened another door and they stepped out onto a little landing with gated steps leading down into the packed lobby. Benny couldn't place where the nasal, twanging music was coming from. It was just there in the air. The crowd below were staring enraptured up at a high wall opposite.

Two tall figures were silhouetted on the blank surface. Male?

Female? She wasn't sure. The shadows were dancing. They seemed

sometimes humanoid, sometimes bird. Thin, tall-necked, stilt-legged fishing birds. When they were human, they wore robes bound at the waist, that had long dangling sleeves. And then the fluttered shapes of their fans became feathers at the tips of their sleeves, more wing than arm. Turning, stooping, rising. Slow, graceful, unfolding movement as their shadow arm-wings carved the air.

Then they would freeze, holding a pose for a moment, before resuming their dance. Two voices, disembodied in the air, called out gruffly with sharp orders or names, but Benny couldn't fathom the words. And then the dancers turned and danced back to back. Or were the birds facing each other with back-bent legs, like the painted cranes that Benny knew from the pictures in her mother's Japanese book? The shadows ran at each other, their heads stretched up, wing-arms flapping in a fight or lovedance.

'Like ibises in the spring rush,' muttered Ivo. He snuffled and wiped his nose.

Benny scoured the lobby from their vantage point, but she couldn't see where the shadow play was being projected from. There was an energy to this dance that began to unnerve her. The movement of the figures was unreal, almost puppet-like. They were going faster, becoming more frenzied. Benny scanned the crowd, half expecting to see a tall figure in a gold kimono trimmed with red, but there was no sign of Iwafuji.

It was difficult to take your eyes off the spectacle for long. The dancers were circling each other, sweeping the air with movement, as if they were ready to leap off the wall. At one turn, as a wing-arm swept wide, the whole crowd actually ducked.

Near the foot of the steps, Benny noticed three women whispering together. One was elderly and Earth oriental, the second was half the first one's age and had Arabic features. The third was hardly older than Benny with the blue-hued skin of a tanned Altairean. They were holding hands, but this wasn't any gesture of affection. Their knuckles were white and their faces were full of fear as they stared up at the shadow dancers.

Further along the wall, Benny saw one of Mrs Montcalme's synchronised husbands. She had only seen the twins a couple of times, yet the appearance of one without the other was strange. She had assumed they were joined at the invisible hip. He was flinging glances up at the dancing silhouettes and simultaneously scribbling on a notepad with an ink pen.

The gruff voices rang out again. The dance was now furious. Each figure snapped shut one fan, making it into a stabbing beak as they rushed together in a fierce battle.

And then the music stopped. The bird dancers froze in a tableau of

out-swept wings. One was skewered on the beak-fan of the other.

The wounded shadow fell slowly backwards, his wings trembling, until he became a lifeless ruin. The crowd gave a low hushed gasp of alarm. The hidden musicians let out a few plucked notes, one at a time, which seemed to Benny like falling tears. Then there was silence. A shadow slid across the wall like a screen, like reality reasserting itself and hiding the performers. The two voices called out again. Staccato, unintelligible words. Some of the crowd started to clap, but it was polite rather than wild applause. As people began to disperse, their faces were mystified, even scared, rather than excited.

Several uniformed crew had appeared and were in heated discussion, studying the now vacant wall.

The three women exchanged looks of utter foreboding. With their hands still linked, they wormed through the crowd heading for a side entrance.

‘Does this happen much?’ Benny asked.

‘Never before,’ Ivo said uneasily.

She kept thinking of Iwafuji’s Japanese puppets, and now the Japanese-style dancing, although the silhouettes were hardly Japanese at all. *The juxtaposition of familiar events may create an entirely new horizon*, said a voice in her head. Oh no, she thought, not Sir Augustus Sod again. His twentieth-century texts habitually encapsulated truths in the driest of pronouncements, and were as non-committal as a daily horoscope.

She suddenly realised that Ivo was shivering. ‘Ivo? Are you all right?’

‘You need dinner,’ he said, starting down the steps. His shape was suddenly hunched and tight as if he was expecting danger.

He led her across the floor of the lobby towards another STAFF ONLY door. On the way they passed Mrs Montcalme’s husband who was still scribbling on his notepad. He was wearing an immaculate linen suit that must have been hell to keep clean. He looked up excitedly as they approached.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘Did you see? What did you make of that?’

Benny shook her head and floundered. ‘Artistically? Well, it was... interesting. Japanese style dancing. Kabuki? Is that the word I want? Or do I mean Bunraku?’

‘Closer to Kabuki,’ he said. ‘That was a live performance. Bunraku is puppets.’

‘Ah,’ said Benny. ‘Bunraku. But the shadow thing. That’s not usual, is it?’

‘Not much. But I was thinking more on a technical level.’

Oh, heck, thought Benny. Who does he think I am? I’m not qualified to award points for technical achievement. She tried to snatch a look

at his notes, but he closed the pad quickly and pocketed it. 'How do you mean?' she said. 'Technical...?'

'Good,' he said with a smirk. 'It was a trick question. It wasn't technical at all.'

'Now you've lost me completely,' confessed Benny. She was aware of Ivo standing awkwardly a few feet away. She reached for his arm.

'This is Ivo, by the way. And I'm Benny Summerfield. Ivo's putting up with me while I'm billeted in his room.'

'Hi,' he said, shaking Ivo's hand. 'I'm Gerry Garner. You're in evening dress already. Good stuff.' There was something too preening about him. He seemed to be all show.

'Um,' said Ivo.

Garner? Benny thought he was Mr Montcalme. One of the twin Mr Montcalmes. 'How's your wife settling in?' she asked.

'My wife?' He smiled, more to himself than to them. 'Oh, Mrs M is fine. Well, she will be. My brother Garry's looking after her. She found the shuttle flight from Calliastra a bit disconcerting. It always takes a day or so to settle her in.'

'Right,' Benny said. Garry and Gerry. And she knew he was either lying or only telling about a third of the truth. 'Well, good to see you again. I expect we'll see you about.'

'But you haven't answered my question,' he said.

Benny glanced at Ivo, who was patiently studying the floor. 'Sorry? You'd better remind me again.'

'The technical performance.'

'Oh, right. Technical. Well, it was very high resolution. Almost holocrystal. 3D. Which was a bit odd for flat-plane shadows. I was looking for a projection source, but I couldn't see any.' She was faffing, hoping it sounded reasonably informed.

'Of course, you couldn't,' he said and he suddenly seemed irritated. 'That's because it wasn't a projection at all!' And he turned sharply on his heel and flounced away across the lobby.

The staff canteen was a ballroom with most of its furniture covered by dust sheets. There was a Closed for Renovation notice on the door.

‘There’s four ballrooms on the liner,’ said Ivo as he led Benny across the detritus-strewn dance floor. ‘The trouble is the place never stops travelling. So they never get a chance to stop over for a complete refit. They close one ballroom at a time in rotation. And we get to eat in style.’

‘Glad you’ve got a good imagination,’ said Benny negotiating her way round a grounded chandelier the size of the Syrinx Cluster.

A small group of smartly dressed waiters was hunched round a table in one corner of the cavernous room. ‘We’ve missed the mid-afternoon rush,’ advised Ivo. ‘Most of them are back on evening shift already. Cutlery to polish, napkins to fold, coffee to boil. You know the sort of thing.’

‘Not really,’ said Benny. ‘Solarfleet Lines had clearly invested in an all-species employment charter.’ Exploitation for All. Darwin would have been proud. Benny counted at least six different races, all in bow-tied uniform. When it came to the survival of the fittest, she realised, waiters were a species in their own right. A cross-species species as much at the mercy of their contemptuous employers as their masters were of them. As for the customers, they were at the mercy of everyone. ‘I’m glad I’m on your side,’ she muttered to Ivo.

He introduced Benny to the motley crew as ‘the one I told you about’, and they all nodded knowingly and said, ‘Hi.’

‘Chef’s done stew again,’ grunted a high-snouted, three-eyed waiter whose name was Gnorenzo. He wore a gleaming Guild of Sommeliers badge on a chain round his broad neck. Levering himself out of his seat, he tottered on little legs over to a trolley parked in the corner. He ladled some brown sludge from a heavy-duty saucepan into a china dish and set it before Benny with a flourish. It had a spicy, toasty smell. She poked at the dish with her spork, hesitating to actually taste it. ‘Is this what all the staff get?’ she asked.

‘It most certainly is,’ said one of the penguinoids she’d seen earlier.

His name was Cardew and his feathers were sleek with brilliantine.

The beak down which he looked at her made it impossible to know if he was smiling.

‘Definitely one of Chef’s better days,’ observed another waiter. It was the grey, grey-eyed Mapravalarian with a face like a reptilian owl. He had a name like Peaches and was the receptionist who had turned Benny away from the Crow’s Nest. He had forgotten their encounter already or was too polite to mention it.

‘You mean the bleeder’s only half drunk. Daft old sod,’ piped up a little elderly human lady with a crumpled face and watery eyes whose name was Audrey.

‘Go on. Try it!’ they chorused. Benny realised she had seven and a half pairs of multicoloured eyes fixed on her. She took a mouthful of stew. It tasted as spicy and cloying as it smelt, but it was hot and she didn’t even gag when they told her it was braised guinea pig.

‘It’s good,’ she said, forcing down another sporkful. Was she supposed to choke and give them all a good laugh? ‘I’ve eaten far worse in backstreet crudburger bars,’ she added. She didn’t care. She hadn’t eaten properly for days. The herbs probably helped, but her hunger swung it. Even a double-decker crudburger with extra bludrop mayo, itself of dubious provenance, as archaeologists are prone to saying, wouldn’t have got the thumbs down today. ‘Mmm, I can taste lime in this sauce. And parsley?’

When she looked up again, the eyes were still watching her expectantly. Despite the situation generously imposed on her by Jeffrey O’Coral, she realised she was going to have to earn her supper. ‘I’d better tell you about me then,’ she said and she saw Ivo nod and smile with relief.

Cardew produced a half-finished carafe of house red and poured her a glass. The little group sat back, hungry as customers for gossip.

Through the ballroom’s huge observation windows, Benny saw a flotilla of little glass-topped gondolas leaving the liner. They all carried the Solarfleet logo. The evening’s sightseeing trips to view Vishnu’s blue moon were under way.

She turned back to her audience. Sooner or later all successful archaeologists land up on the lecture circuit, so she might as well start here. Talk about dubious provenance. The group were all attention, so she proceeded to give as selective an account of her trip as the heady house red on a nearly empty stomach would allow.

They listened more quietly than she expected, like a jury before whom she had to justify herself. She started to be selective over what she said, watching for their reactions, being cautious enough to leave out her encounter with Iwafuji. The bureaucratic muddle resulting from the loss of her identity drew frowns. Typical of O’Coral,’ observed Gnorenzo. ‘He can’t never resist flinging his weight about.’

‘What a git,’ said Audrey. ‘What do you reckon? Time for an accident behind the fridges?’

‘Lots of little accidents,’ enthused Cardew, raking his spork repeatedly across the tablecloth. ‘String it out. A long, slow death by a thousand slices like Parma ham!’

‘What a waste of decent melon,’ said Ivo.

‘Um,’ said Benny and then she saw that Ivo’s eyes were laughing.

He caught her glance and looked suitably embarrassed. 'And thank you for your help,' she added and raised her glass to him.

Audrey leant in close, smelling of beer and gravy. 'Don't you worry, duck. There's those who pay a fortune to lose their identities. So you make the most of it while you can, eh? They'll soon remember who you are. And then you'll have to behave yourself again.' She gave Benny a sharp nudge in the ribs.

'But why would anyone do that to her?' asked Ivo.

'Sounds to me as if it was a hundred per cent deliberate,' said one of the dustsheets behind the table. It slid down to reveal a pair of shimmering eyes, apparently composed of two dollops of beady black caviar, set in a long, pale oval face.

'Sorry, 3adne,' said Peaches. 'Are we keeping you awake?'

'I was 76 per cent fully asleep, 21 per cent dozing,' yawned the apparition. The remaining three per cent was sufficient to follow your gripping conversation. My time is my own. I share it willingly, even my afternoon break. No extra charge.'

'This is Benny Summerfield,' said Ivo. 'Benny, this is 3adne Tabsystem, one of the service cashiers.'

'Delighted,' said 3adne airily, he rose and extended a hand which was composed mainly of tabulated fingers. It was like shaking hands with a bunch of plugs. He was wearing a long voluminous shift, not so different from the dustsheet from under which he had emerged.

'Well, you certainly must have upset someone.'

'Must I?' said Benny.

'Oh, yes. To be so efficiently excised from life's ledger must mean someone's annoyed with you. Things can disappear, but there's always a trace, however small a carry forward.'

'There's still me,' Benny said. 'I still exist.'

'Hmm. Which would imply that someone simply wanted to make things awkward for you. I may be stating the obvious here, but if you had also vanished, been "scratched out" in the vulgar, that would be totalled as a deceasement, even murder, although the latter would be hard to prove due to the lack of a corpse. Do you have a good lawyer?'

'Not just now,' said Benny.

'So,' continued 3adne, 'is there anyone you owe credit to? Anyone you've offended? Whose goods or chattels you might have absconded with?'

'Ah.' Benny took a deep breath. 'Have any of you had dealings with the passengers in Deluxe apartment 3?' She related her one hundred per cent accidental encounter with the Japanese Housekeeper, but the waiters all shook their heads.

'I've served Deluxe 2,' said Cardew. 'Those Garner brothers with

their fat wife with eye shades, who has more opinion than appetite and doesn't eat at all.'

'Ooh, you mean that Mrs Montcalme,' said Audrey. 'Goes on about her diet all the time, the old trout. Can't be seen eating in public, but I bet she shovels down the canapes once she's out of sight.'

'I'm an absolute martyr to my waistband, dear,' proclaimed Gnorenzo with a flamboyant sweep of his hand and the others cheered.

'She told me she was a little off colour,' said Cardew.

'Little?' The other exploded into a gale of laughter. 'Little!'

'Funny colour altogether. Looks like the inside-out of an oyster,' observed Audrey. 'Where's she from, d'you think?'

'But about Deluxe 3...', interrupted Benny, but her effort was in vain.

Cardew shrugged. 'She's a good tipper though. And the husbands are quite cute.'

It was clear that all the waiters subjected their customers to this sort of scrutiny, so Benny pushed another sporkful of guinea pig stew round her plate and waited for her moment. She noted that Ivo didn't involve himself. What a sweetheart he was, his eyes turned down, looking faintly embarrassed as the ritual disembowelling of the Montcalme-Garners proceeded apace. Somewhere she thought she heard the umpire calling for fresh scalpels.

'The husbands?' exclaimed Peaches. 'We all know what those two are after. She's loaded right up to her mascara-line. And you know that hair's a wig as well...'

'You still charged her for the cover, I hope,' said 3adne.

'I should have charged double cover,' said Cardew. 'She takes up nearly two chairs.'

'So no one from Deluxe 3 has eaten in the restaurants,' said Benny firmly. 'But there's a Housekeeper in residence, so who's she employed by? And whose name is the apartment booked in?'

Everyone looked at 3adne. 'What?' he said defensively.

'You've got the manifest,' said Gnorenzo. 'It's built in. Direct cerebral access. Come on, let fly.'

There was a chorus of agreement, but 3adne waved his indulgently fingered hands in protest. 'Impossible. Solarfleet Lines do not allow credit staff to discuss passengers' details with... with passengers.'

'He knows!' shouted Peaches.

3adne gave a whimper of exasperation and snatched his dustsheet up, holding it in front of him like a shield. 'Unassailable!' he cried.

'No details available. Not accountable!'

Gnorenzo, who was the sort of size you don't argue with, reached out to grab the sheet... and then stopped. A dark shadow moved

across the surface of the dustsheet. There was a twang of instruments and a roll of drums from who knows where. The silhouette of a man, his hair scraped up in a topknot, raised a thin sword and slashed. The dustsheet crumpled to the floor, sliced in half, but the shadow lingered for a moment in the air, caught in its final pose, its sword raised high. One of the gruff, disembodied voices from the bird-dance called out. It was a name that it sounded, Benny was sure. An impossible name shouted in appreciation. Then, with another crash of invisible instruments, the shadow was gone.

3adne shuddered and fell backwards. He was shaking for at least five minutes and had to be given a large balloon of brandy to restore him. 'I hope this is paid for,' he spluttered between gulps of the spirit.

'Left unfinished by cabin 471,' said Audrey holding up the bottle.

'Three star Old Napoleon. Some people have more credit than common sense.'

The others were looking decidedly jittery. No one said a word. They just withdrew in different directions, apparently heading back to work. Benny took Ivo's arm and muttered. 'I saw that shadow before. In Deluxe 3. Like a warrior. And there were those different shadows in the lobby too.'

Ivo sighed, unhitched himself from her and crouched by 3adne, who had slumped forward into an opaque heap on the tabletop. 'I need a copy of one of my bills,' he said. The room service order I delivered to Deluxe 3 at lunchtime.'

'You've been there?' said Benny. 'You could have said.'

Ivo smiled ever so sweetly. 'If the Malagasy won't come to Malagascar, then Malagascar must go to the Malagasy.' He turned back to the still-trembling cashier. 'The bill please.'

3adne harrumphed a lot and finished his brandy. 'This is solely for you, I take it.'

'Would I lie to you, 3adne? I just have to check everything I delivered is on the tab.'

3adne fished into one of his pockets and produced a palmpad. After a moment perusing the screen, punctuated by glances at Benny to make sure she was not looking, he showed the screen to Ivo. 'I know nothing,' he said.

'Don't mind me,' Benny intoned. 'I don't exist.'

1 x Miso Soup

1 x Gyoza

1 x Prawn and Squid Ramen

3 x Fresh Mulberries with Green Tea Ice Cream

1 btl Geisha's Choice Sake

'Satisfied?' 3adne snapped.

‘Just one thing,’ Ivo snatched the little instrument before 3adne could protest. His spindly fingers flicked over the controls as he studied the screen. ‘Okay. That’s fine. I was wrong. Didn’t miss anything after all. Sorry.’ He smiled, his eyes deep pools of innocence, and handed the pad back to its indignant owner.

‘Some of us have work to do.’ 3adne smoothed down his voluminous shift and cut a stately path across the dance floor. Benny wondered for a moment if he was pregnant. When he reached the doors, he turned and called back, ‘You know nothing, of course. How could you? You don’t exist.’ And he left, clattering the doors behind him. Benny assumed it was the brandy that had brought colour to his cheeks. The colour had been a delicate sort of eggshell blue.

‘So,’ said Ivo thoughtfully and drummed his fingers on the table.

‘So what?’ asked Benny.

‘Deluxe 3 is booked in the name of Mr Hanekawa Goro. Single cabin supplement. Only one passenger.’

‘That would be Iwafuji,’ said Benny. The Housekeeper. But then you must have met her when you delivered her lunch.’

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Tall human woman. Japanese. Too much make-up, not much to say and no tip at all.’

‘And vitriolic too. Just the sort to bear a grudge. So she must be on the manifest as well. Unless Mr Goro booked the room for her.’

Sometimes things just snapped into place. ‘Iwafuji’s minding a consignment for him. All those antique puppets.’

‘Benny,’ said Ivo firmly. ‘You were intruding into her apartment.’

‘But she didn’t have to wipe me off the face of the universe.’

‘You don’t know that she did. It could be just a simple error.’

‘Oh, yeah. Right. And what about all the shadows? If you tell me there’s a rational explanation for all this, I’ll... I’ll steal all your bananas!’

He looked almost hurt. ‘I have work to do,’ he said. ‘See you later.’

He loped off towards the kitchens. Benny heard the rattle of pots and pans as he disappeared through the STAFF ONLY doors. At least the look he had given her was fond. Or was it just indulgent? Other people had fish to fry, sauces to season, guinea pigs to garnish. But she had nothing. Nothing meant eating with the staff and kicking her heels until she was too bored to do anything other than go back to bed.

Unless, of course, she could think of better things to do.

Benny sat in the atrium outside the St Attenborough Conference Hall listening to the New Gondwana Ladies' Glee Choir performing on the inside. Their music was a mix of modern and classical in modern arrangements. The vocals from the churnhead classic Copper Clone Coitus were a bit of a shock coming from a group of respectable middle-aged women on the cruise liner circuit. All that vocal grinding! But there were also excerpts from a recently unearthed twentieth-century opera attributed to Leonid Brezhnev called West Side Story and Benny recognised a song from My Fair Lady – pre-neoclassic stuff which seemed a lot more comfortable.

Gradually the old culture, so roundly trashed and lost during the invasion of Earth in the 22nd century, was being discovered and rehabilitated. It put the lie to the old Martian premise that Earth had nothing to contribute to the culture of the Galaxy. Early expeditions from the Red Planet had only dug as far as a strata of ring-pulls before losing interest and moving on to the far greater challenge of excavating Venus without their ships dissolving in the acid atmosphere.

A woman's voice introduced the next item in fruity tones, but Benny could only make out something about a Chorale Telepathique, a telepathic chorus, which surely couldn't be right. Then there was a hushed silence which seemed to go on and on. Benny strained to catch any sound at all, but only an occasional cough showed that the hall was still occupied. The silence became almost tangible. It distanced her from reality, stretching away like a bridge on which thoughts trafficked back and forth like shadows. Her mind wandered back to Iwafuji and the consignment in her care, and she remembered that there had also been an Iwafuji doll in one of the cases. She had to know what it all meant. She wasn't going mad with boredom, or because she'd had a traumatic year on another planet, which was what everyone else would tell her. It wasn't the potfish spiders that had got to her, it was the bloody paperwork. The writing up the log, the requests for equipment and funding, reports on accidental death.

She hadn't started on her diary either. She wanted a break and time for herself. Time to read a decent book, not write one of her own.

Across the St Attenborough Atrium, past the gorilla statue, she saw a sign that said *Library*.

Finally several people inside the hall started to clap, but it was hardly a warm reception. It was just polite, like the mystified applause that had followed the crane dancers in the ship's main lobby. Immediately the Ladies launched into the rumbustious song that

Benny had heard them rehearsing earlier. The *Okey-dokey* song.

Benny was bolstered by the sudden all-pervading sense of relief. The audience started to clap along in time. It was a sign, even though Benny didn't believe in such unscientific superstition. *Woo-hoo, go okey-dokey*. Benny abandoned her seat, nodded to the gorilla and sauntered off towards the library.

The library consisted of one small ill-lit room with an antiquated terminal in one corner and an *OUT OF ORDER* coffee machine in the other. No one was there but, even better, there was no charge for use and no need to register. Goddess bless Solarfleet (occasionally) thought Benny and she spent an hour or so googling to her heart's content.

There were fourteen people called Hanekawa Goro, but none of them had apparent links to bunraku or any other form of puppetry.

She made a note to visit a sushi bar recommended by one Hanekawa Goro (backpacker) on Deepak Station off Nirvana 4. Ducking the annoying pop-ups for Dollyrockers, she found that her own number of entries had gone up from 37 to 41. This included a dubious site called *Jaiwan Froggies* with some downloaded pics of her in her diving gear which some dweeb had found on the official dig site. But at least she was there. So the erasure of her existence seemed to extend only as far as financial matters. Sitemaster Ticklehead reckoned she was one hot baybabe. Yuk, thought Benny and went to look up recipes for cooking guinea pig instead.

The 21 per cent protein content of the guinea pig is higher than that of poultry, pork, mutton or beef. Its eight per cent fat content is lower than that of other meats.

A traditional Peruvian recipe: Skin and gut your guinea pigs. Line a stone pit with llama dung and firewood, once the fire has built up heat, bury your guinea pig in the coals. Cook for ninety minutes until done. Serve with a lime and parsley sauce and salad.

Benny wondered what Chef had used as a substitute for llama dung.

'The mind's paths wind long and branching. A good place to lose yourself,' quavered a voice at her side. A trembling hand mottled with liver spots clunked a cup of steaming liquid down beside her. 'Green tea, freshly brewed.'

'Thanks,' said Benny before she even looked. The woman standing next to her was slightly hunched with silver hair and a lined, kindly face. She was dressed in a robe of slightly worn silk patterned with green and red checks like Japanese gingham. Benny sipped the tea, which was fragrant and cleared her thoughts wonderfully. This is better than synthetic coffee any day.'

'Need any help, *Miss Summerfield*?'

‘Eh?’ Benny said. ‘Oh, hang on. Let me guess. Googling themselves is the first thing anyone does, right?’

The old lady bowed. ‘I beg your pardon for prying. My name is Ohatsu and I’m always at your service.’

‘Thanks,’ Benny said. ‘I needed to check. It’s just a relief to know I still exist... somewhere anyway. Even if it’s not here.’

‘Are you enjoying your trip?’ There was gentle mockery behind her wizened eyes.

‘I’ve had better,’ Benny said. ‘It was a last-minute thing. I haven’t been on my own for a while. It takes some getting used to again.’

‘No point in keeping company with your own head,’ said Ohatsu.

‘No one’s as alone as they think they are.’

‘I know.’ Benny drained her tea. ‘Do you work in the library?’

‘I keep an eye on it. I offer advice, but not many people come in. They’re much too busy being on holiday to do sensible things.’ She looked expectantly at Benny, as if people’s stories were the things she lived for. ‘So it’s good to find an audience.’

Benny felt embarrassed, but one outpouring of her woes was quite enough for today. She reached for her bag. ‘Well, I’d like to stay and chat, but...’

‘You have to go.’ Ohatsu sighed. ‘Ah, well...’

‘Sorry. I’m just so tired.’

‘Then you must rest. Remember: archaeologists who dig too deep get buried sooner than they planned.’

‘Thanks,’ said Benny, mystified.

‘Come back when you can. There are always better ideas after the kettle’s boiled.’ She bowed low.

‘Right.’ Benny tried to bow back, but felt awkward, so she smiled and left before she said anything else stupid to someone who obviously knew far more of what was going on than she did.

The corridors of the liner felt close and stifling as if the air conditioning had gone on the blink. The gondolas on the moon trip were returning to the liner and excited sightseers were making their ways to the bars and restaurants. Benny just wanted to get out of their way.

She reached her door, swiped her temporary key in the lock and slipped inside.

A gentle breeze blew in her face and she caught the scent of honey.

The light had a pinkish tinge. The air in the room was empty, yet the walls were alive, swirling with a gentle blizzard of tiny shadows like falling snow or blossom. It must be blossom because of the scent. It made the whole room sway and drift. From somewhere came the voice of a single flute, its tune sliding across the notes, plaintive, yet

strong and alive. She thought she felt the shadows touching her skin, settling on her lashes. She slowly raised one arm and then the other, turning them back and forth, watching them create little eddies in the sliding shadows. On and on sang the flute as her own silhouette danced against the wall amongst the petals.

At last the apparition faded, the flute song moved away and sank over an unknown horizon. Benny let her arms drop.

Immediately the gruff voice in the air called out. 'Sommerfieed-ya!'

'That's me,' muttered Benny, more elated than alarmed. She climbed onto her bunk exhausted and let the shadow of sleep slide over her like a blanket.

It is night. Benny is on a hillside. Down below, there is a horizontal oblong of light in the dark. Someone has left the shoji screen open. More light glows through the paper walls around it.

She comes to a narrow bridge which leads across to the house. It is flat and featureless with no parapet. She peers over the edge at the dark, bottomless chasm between worlds. Shadowy shapes are moving on the bridge around her. People are passing to and fro, blown like petals on the breeze. A warrior on horseback with jingling reins almost knocks her over.

A man in a wide conical hat pulls a trundling cart. People are carrying things over their shoulders. Some are bent almost double by the burdens on their backs.

Two shadows meet halfway. 'It is cold on the bridge tonight,' says one.

'Someone left the screens open,' says the other.

Told you, thinks Benny. She looks back and sees another oblong of light far behind her. A shape moves into the opening, crouching on the floor. It's Ivo, she thinks and turns eagerly back, heading along the bridge.

'Better hurry,' warns the shadow of the old woman as Benny passes her.

'Don't get stuck on the bridge after lights out.'

'Just like you to get stuck in another mess,' says the Admiral's shadow as he marches by in his full dress uniform. And he calls back, 'I suppose you want some money now. Heavens knows what I'll say when I find out.'

'Sorry, Dad,' mumbles Benny, but he has gone already, lost in the crowd of shadows heading towards the light at the far side of the bridge.

She turns back, fighting through the oncoming people. Ahead of her, the Ivo shape in the doorway rises and she sees that it has been the Housekeeper all the time.

Benny struggles to reach the light, but Iwafuji is closing the screen against her. The woman is laughing. Her eyes glitter with malice. The oblong of light slides shut in Benny's face. She pushes against the paper screen, but cannot get through. Iwafuji's shadow moves across the surface. She flings up her arm in a gesture of theatrical triumph. The glow inside goes out.

At the far end of the bridge, the other oblong of light slides down to a square, a needle, nothing.

It is dark on the bridge. Benny shivers in the cold, sitting tight, too scared to move. She can't see where the edge is. Don't move, don't move! You'll fall! The dark is smothering her, getting in her mouth and up her nose, choking her scream so that it can't get out of her head...

She lay unmoving in clothes that clung with cold sweat, staring up at the underside of the top bunk. She was waiting for her heart to stop racing and for the choked scream that was still inside to find its way out into the light. The liner's pipes thrummed away nearby, but the air in the room was warm and clammy, and the unnatural lighting had a stale, tainted feel.

'Are you there?' she called, but there was no answer from above.

Ivo was still on duty. It was only 22.00 hours ship's time and the night stretched a long way before her. She thought about getting off the liner at the next port, but she was tied to the ship until they reached Proxima Xaynor, where there'd be more questions and more accusations.

Iwafuji is laughing.

Dammit, she thought, what did I do? And then more darkly, how can I get my own back?

'Oh, come on, Benny. These things lead to trouble as you well know.' That was her mother talking. Her poor dear mum. Long gone, but never far away, like all lost parents. So why do parents never tire of telling you what you're doing wrong? Even when they're dead, they still turn up. You are number one venue on their lecture circuit and they now know far more than they ever did when they were alive.

They just sit in the corner of your head taking notes for future chastisements. Thank the Goddess they never knew about the time Benny and Simon Kyle sneaked out of academy and went on a bender to McGravity's. Tuesdays were pagan festival nite and that week it had been the Burns Nite Special when all the men had to wear skirts.

Benny got so drunk, she tried to climb the front of the hotel. And there was the time when Simon booked seats on a flight to see the fly-past of Comet Moiseyevitch. He was being a romantic dope, but she missed it all anyway because she got so drunk that Simon had to push her back to the academy on a spaceport luggage trolley. He said she sang, *Simon Kyle, Simon Kyle, Riding through the glen* all the way home and woke up Mr Dive, the grizzly old porter. It meant he got a week's solitary and didn't dare come and see her for another month.

Iwafuji still hasn't bloody shut up. Don't you laugh at me, you housekeeping bitch!

That swung it. Benny got off the bed and methodically removed her

damp clothes. She searched out her black pullover and utility trousers and tried to shake out the creases. If she was going to do this, she might at least look the part. As she tugged the clothes on, she half-hoped that Ivo would walk in and stop her.

No such luck. She rummaged through three bags before she found her heavy-duty hand torch. Not just a good torch, but a damned fine cosh as well. Before departing, she offered up a small prayer to St Indiana, patron saint of archaeologists, vowing that the over-powdered denizen of Deluxe apartment 3 would never know what was about to hit her.

There were voices raised in Deluxe apartment 2. Benny could hear them from the passage as she passed on the way to Deluxe 3. A man was shouting 'No! Back! The other way! We can't just leave her like that!' It was one of the Garner twins/clones/whatever-they-were.

'What did you have to do that for?' yelled a second voice, but it was the same voice, the other Garner. A lot of scuffling ensued and then a heavy thunk as something hit the floor.

She decided that Deluxe 3 could wait. She leant forward and put her ear to the door.

'She's been playing up for too long,' protested the first voice. 'Better to get rid of her once and for all.'

Benny swallowed hard and glanced round, checking she was alone.

It had gone quiet inside the room, so she pressed her ear harder to the door.

The door flew open and a Garner brother barrelled out, colliding with her. They both stood staring, rendered speechless by the other's sudden appearance.

After a few moments, he grinned with embarrassment and said 'Hi. Um. Big problem.'

'Hi,' she replied and looked past him. Inside the deluxe furnished apartment, his identical twin was squatting beside a mountainous shape. It was Mrs Montcalme, lying on the plush red carpet.

'Oh, Goddess. What happened?' Benny dodged into the room, transfixed by the monumental shape like some tumbled ruin. 'Is she okay? Well, no. Obviously. How did it happen? Have you called the ship's doctor?' She froze, glanced at both the twins, thought better of her intrusion and turned to leave.

The brother by the door blocked her path. His smile had taken on a fixed desperation. 'It's not what you think,' he said.

Benny glanced back at the body. 'You tell me what I'm thinking.'

'What were you doing out there?' asked the second brother. He stepped neatly over Mrs Montcalme and walked towards her.

'Trying to hear what all the shouting was,' said Benny standing her ground. She hefted the heavy torch in her hand. 'Are you going to call someone or shall I?'

The two brothers exchanged glances. 'There's no point in calling anyone,' said the second brother.

'Gerry, for pity's sake,' said the first. 'It doesn't all have to be games.'

Gotcha, thought Benny. He's Gerry, so by process of elimination you must be Garry.

'Do you think she doesn't know?' added Gerry. 'I thought the very first time we saw her, she'd be the first to find out.'

'You hoped,' muttered Garry.

'Why else was she snooping at the door?'

Benny had had enough. She pushed past Garry and knelt by Mrs Montcalme. The woman's wrist felt strange. It wasn't just the coldness or the lack of pulse. The skin, for all its mother-of-pearl appearance, was tough and thick like vulcanised rubber. But if she wasn't human, what did that prove? Benny touched the neck and got the same sensation. One of the woman's grafted eye shades was cracked across.

'Dead as a diplodocus,' said Gerry.

'And twice as fat,' added Garry. It was like watching someone talking to his own reflection, but hard to tell which was which.

'Get a doctor,' said Benny.

Garry laughed. 'She doesn't know.' He started to clap his hands.

'Oh, brava! Archivrava!'

'Leave her alone, you pillock!' muttered Gerry.

'Perfect,' crowed Garry. 'I hope you set the cams. She really doesn't know!'

'Of course, I know,' protested Benny. 'That's why I'm calling ship security!'

She tried to push past Garry to reach the vidcom, but he caught her arm and pulled her back. 'Aren't you frightened?' he said, still laughing.

'I'll let you know when I've got over the trauma. So get off me!' His grip was burning her arm. She swung the torch at him with her free hand, but Gerry caught her wrist and held her tight. She was held between the two.

'It's not what you imagine,' said Garry. 'She's not dead. Not in the way you think.'

Benny eyed the corpse of Mrs Montcalme. It was a large inert object wrapped in expensive fashion accessories, but it hadn't stopped being a person. A rich dead person with two identical and deeply unsuitable husbands.

'Please,' said Gerry, 'just sit down and we'll tell you.' He let go of Benny's arm and she wrenched the other hand free of Garry. They nodded her towards the expensive sofa, so she sat in an expensive armchair instead because it was nearer the door.

'People know where I am,' she said. 'They'll come looking if I don't get back.'

'Who are you working for?' said Garry.

'No one,' insisted Benny. 'But I have friends in high places.'

The twins exchanges pained glances.

'I believe her,' said Gerry.

Benny sat back in the ludicrously comfortable chair. 'Thank you,' she said tartly.

'She was still sneaking about though. Spying,' said Garry.

'Let me get you a drink,' said Gerry. He circumnavigated Mrs Montcalme, heading for an exquisite art-nouveau style cocktail cabinet in an alcove.

'Which of you killed her?' said Benny. 'Or was it a joint effort?'

'Hardly,' said Garry. 'But Mrs M just wouldn't do as she was told.'

And he gave the corpse a hefty kick.

'Ignore him,' insisted Gerry. 'I told you. We did not kill her. Technically, she isn't dead at all.' He came back from the cabinet with a large balloon of brandy and handed it to Benny. 'I'm sorry to ask this, but what do you know about the shadowplayers?'

'Stuff them! Just look at her!' said Benny. 'How can she not be dead!'

'By not being alive, for God's sake!' Gerry sat down on the sofa. He swigged down the shot of brandy he'd poured himself in one go and took a deep breath. 'Mrs M is and never was alive,' he said quietly.

'She's an art installation.'

'Our art installation,' muttered Garry.

Benny took a gulp of brandy which almost burned her dry throat.

'Art?' she said flatly and stared at the fashion-swathed shape on the floor. 'You're kidding me.'

'We're kidding everybody,' said Garry. 'That's our business. Creating characters.'

'Right.' She took another gulp of brandy.

Gerry played his glass round his hands. 'We've hit a few technical problems with her, that's all. It means she's off the road for a bit. And it couldn't have happened at a worse time.'

'Well, that's a relief, I suppose. I mean that she's not real.' Benny was trying hard not to be sick.

Gerry looked distinctly awkward. 'Look, I don't think we even know your name.'

'Bernice Summerfield, archaeologist, freelance,' said Benny. 'Leastways I used to be. No. No, still am.'

'Right,' said Gerry. 'Miss... Ms... sorry, Summerfield, we're deeply sorry for the misunderstanding.' He shot Garry a pained look.

'Yeah, sorry,' agreed Garry, 'if that saves litigation.'

Benny climbed out of the chair. 'Look, can I just... I mean, I've got to be sure.' She crouched down to study the supposed *objet d'art* more closely. The body of Mrs Montcalme looked flawless, even down to the pearly triple chin. But she was used to art that was old and desiccated and had to be dug out of the ground. She touched the face again, and now that she'd been told, the skin did seem too smooth.

There were areas that lacked pores and were too rigid.

‘Okay. I believe you,’ she said. ‘So what is she? An android? Some sort of machine?’

Garry had sat down next to Gerry. They looked like two guilty teenagers waiting for the judgement and sentence of their elders.

‘She’s mostly organic,’ said Garry. ‘Home grown at our artlab on New Zurich. She has a thought centre that pulses subjective projections to the viewer’s brain. That’s what convinces you she’s alive.’

‘It all works really well most of the time,’ continued Gerry. ‘Apart from the synapse modulators in her brainpack, that is. Those are what keep going on the blink.’

‘And of course she doesn’t eat,’ said Benny.

Garry shook his head. ‘You noticed then. We’d like her to really, but then you have all the other bodily functions that follow on. Once you start the digestive process... I mean, what goes in, must come out.’

‘Let’s face it, who wants a nappy company on the list of sponsors?’ added Gerry. He produced a glossy paper brochure with an elaborate Gerry and Garry motif on the front and handed it to Benny. These are the plans for our exhibition on Earth next year. We’re going to build a whole fleet of Mrs Ms, all different colours and surface configurations. They’ll be popping up all over. In public places anyway.’

Goddess, thought Benny as she flicked through page after page of pictures of Mrs Montcalme standing up, Mrs Montcalme sitting down, Mrs Montcalme with blotches or images or maps printed all over her. She had read somewhere about the discovery on Earth of a whole warehouse full of painted cows. They were found in the aftermath of the invasion and although some observers reckoned they were the votive idols of a bovine-worshipping cult, others reckoned that they were art installations, which were scattered across cities on a purely amusement-based premise.

‘This trip is just a try-out,’ said Gerry. ‘We wanted to see who’d be the first to spot that Mrs M was more than just an average fat tourist.’

He glanced back at his brother.

Garry’s tone had hardened again. ‘And that brings us back to the shadowplayers. So what do you know about them?’

‘Me!’ floundered Benny. ‘No. You’ve got it wrong.’

‘Then why were you snooping about outside?’

‘I was just... passing.’ She looked from one to the other and knew it had gone all lame. ‘Oh, bum. You’re dead right. I was snooping. Trying to find out more about the shadow things. And I heard you arguing. And look where that led. But I don’t know any more about the shadows than you. They keep appearing though. Just about anywhere. They were even in my bloody cabin. So what do you think?’

Are they another sort of installation?’

Gerry studied the carpet. ‘That’s what we thought. We went to complain to the Captain. It’s in our contract. Mrs M is meant to be the only installation on the liner.’

‘We thought the shadowplayers were rivals,’ said Garry. ‘But Solarfleet denies knowing anything about them. Or so they say. They’re in a real watoozi over it. It’s upsetting the passengers.’

‘It upset me,’ said Benny, ‘and it’s upstaging you.’

‘Bloody things,’ chorused the twins.

‘They’re different,’ Benny suggested. ‘Not like yours at all. I thought they were Earth/Japanese in style.’

‘At least ours is original,’ complained Garry.

‘If she was working,’ added Gerry.

Benny shrugged. ‘You know there’s all that Japanese stuff in the next apartment.’

‘We thought that too,’ Gerry said. ‘But there’s only the little old guy staying there. He’s got a few antiques, that’s all.’

‘What’s his name?’ asked Benny. ‘Is it Goro?’

‘No, that wasn’t it. It was... Jinkazu? Lenkusu?’

‘Dankizo,’ said Garry. ‘Mr Dankizo. Dear old thing. He showed us his consignment of frozen silkworm larvae. He’s starting up a silk farm. He’s bought an orchard somewhere... where was it?’

‘Proxima Xaynor?’ said Gerry.

‘No. That was where he was changing flights. He was going on somewhere else.’

‘Are we both talking about Deluxe 3?’ she said. ‘I was told the apartment was booked in the name of Hanekawa Goro.’

‘Mr Dankizo. That’s the only one we’ve met,’ Gerry said.

Benny tilted her brandy glass, trying to get the last few drops.

‘There’s a collection of old Japanese puppets there too. Bunraku.’

The brothers exchanged further puzzled glances. ‘We’ve only met Mr Dankizo,’ said Garry.

‘You’re lucky. I’ve only met his housekeeper.’ Benny shuddered even at the thought, but the Garners both shook their heads. ‘Tall and frightening. Name of Iwafuji. You can hardly miss her. Steer well clear.’ She wondered how many passengers there were in Deluxe 3.

But after the brandy, it all seemed rather insignificant. She wasn’t sure how much she trusted her own judgement any more. Maybe Ivo had got it wrong. Better to let sleeping spiders... sleep.

The evening seemed to have reached a natural conclusion. Benny stood up, handed her glass to Gerry and picked up her torch. ‘And I was going to have an early night,’ she said. ‘Well, obviously I won’t say anything. Thanks for the drink. I um... hope it all works out.’

Gerry and Garry took a simultaneous and deep breath. Thank you

for listening, Professor,' they said in unison. In fact, Gerry called her Professor, and Garry called her Bernice.

'Fine,' said Benny. 'Well, goodnight, Gerry and Garry. And goodnight Mrs Montcalme.'

The body's head turned jerkily towards her, looking up from the floor. 'Goodnight, dear. It was lovely.'

'My God, she's working again.' The twins were immediately crouching beside her, producing scanners, tweaking her features.

Benny quietly slid out of the door and left them to it.

The passage was quiet and the brandy had been strong. She leant against the wall. She'd had enough. She was ready for her bed.

And then she noticed that the door along the passage was ajar. The door to Deluxe 3. Through the gap the room was dark, but then a beam of light swung across the gloom. Someone was inside with a torch.

You're not doing this, she said to herself as she edged herself towards the door. Sober up Benny, and go home now. You've had enough problems and brandy for one night. There were times when you could drink an entire student refectory under the communal table. Not any more.

She ignored herself. It was just her mother talking. A sure sign she was getting more like her parent every day. Soon it'd be the bouffant hair and the Brad Caramel concerts. She also thought it could be Ivo talking, but he could shut up because he hardly knew her.

By now she had reached the door. The torch beam inside had stopped swinging about. She could see through the gap that it was directed at one of the packing cases where a figure was crouching, silhouetted against the glow. The intruder, a woman, was rummaging through a stack of papers.

Benny pushed gently at the door and it gave a loud creak.

Immediately the woman snapped off her light, but Benny flicked on her own torch and caught the prowler square in the circular beam.

She was young, not much older than Benny, with blue-tanned skin and Altairean features. She shielded her eyes, looking for a way to bolt, but the stacks of cases boxed her in.

'Don't run,' said Benny. 'I won't hurt you, I promise. Look, no weapons. Okay?'

The woman swore in Altairean under her breath. 'Keep your voice down,' she hissed.

'Look, I reckon we've got the same thing in mind,' Benny muttered.

'You just got here before me, that's all.'

There was a thud close by. The woman panicked completely. 'Get out! Get out!' She tried to barge past, but Benny caught her arm and

held her back. She scratched and struggled, tearing her nails into Benny's cheek.

The room flooded with light. Iwafuji was standing in an inner doorway. Her face was flat and white, her eyes narrowed with anger.

A droplet of liquor seeped from the corner of her tight, red mouth. It looked like blood.

Benny looked towards the outer door, but a shadow flitted across it and it slammed shut.

'Every ship has its rats.' The housekeeper's voice had a whining, fluting timbre. A calculated mockery of the contemptible victims caught in her snare. She had a finality to her. A presence that blotted out all hope. 'Which ones do we have here? The much-favoured blue girl? And this one is the chambermaid!' She bowed low. 'How can I be worthy of such honoured company?'

Benny had a sudden notion that it might be true. Chambermaid might be her real ID. The rest of her life had been a sham. She'd found her level at last.

'Iwafuji,' said her fellow prisoner with a quavering voice, 'we didn't mean to disturb you.' She shrank back visibly as the chatelaine slid nearer, advancing with the tiniest steps.

'How dare you! Common peasant girls up from the country. Nothing better than that!'

'Sorry,' mumbled Benny. She felt ashamed. She touched her cheek where she had been scratched and found she was bleeding.

'Bringing dust into the house. Filching scraps from under the floor.'

Iwafuji had come so close that Benny could see how her black eyes shifted and flickered with shadows. The woman dabbed at her red mouth with her finger, wiping away the old blood. Her lips parted a little as if she anticipated a fresh bite. 'What shall we do to teach them respect? Send the little thieves home barefoot? Make them pull an ox-cart through the town so the people can see their disgrace? A cartload of dishonour for their families?'

'Please, Iwafuji,' mouthed the other woman. 'I haven't stolen anything.'

'But you would have done,' snarled the Housekeeper, 'if I hadn't been so quick.' She paced the floor and her long silk robe trailed behind her like the tail of a snake. Then she turned towards Benny again. 'And you, chambermaid, not even fit to keep your name, what shall we do with you? How shall we punish you for breaking into Iwafuji's house uninvited?'

Benny couldn't look at those eyes. There was an intensity to them.

Their white lids barely contained the darkness within.

'Let's leave the rats for the cat to play with,' crooned Iwafuji.

Benny heard her companion swallow hard.

There was a roll of drums. Iwafuji smiled like poison and slid from the room. The inner door closed behind her.

Instantly the young woman ran to the door leading to the passage.

A look of terror glazed her eyes as she struggled and pulled at the door, but it stayed firmly shut.

Benny took a turn, but the handle refused to budge. It bit into her hands. She kicked the door several times, at first in a rage, then in despair at her useless efforts.

The drum roll calmed a little, but still trundled on, punctuated by sharp reports on wood blocks.

‘You know Iwafuji,’ said Benny. ‘Who is she? What happens now? And who’s Hanekawa Goro?’

Her companion stared at her. ‘It’ll be a demon next. That’s what she’ll call up.’

Benny shook her head. ‘I don’t do demons.’ She started to hunt round the cases. Any sort of weapon, that was what she needed.

Something better than a cosh. As she went, she noticed that the large case that had housed the puppets was gone.

The Altairean woman stood and watched. ‘What are you after?’ she demanded. ‘Who are you?’

‘Benny Summerfield. Freelance archaeologist. Who are you?’

She moved in close, staring Benny in the face. ‘I saw you,’ she muttered ‘You were watching the shadow dance in the lobby. Up on the balcony?’

Benny had thought she looked familiar. ‘And you were down in the crowd with two friends. You looked scared. As if you knew what was going on.’

‘Maybe I’ve got a right to know,’ she protested.

‘Maybe. But you still didn’t tell me your name.’ Benny opened a long case and smiled as she saw the contents.

The drums rolled around the air in a fresh crescendo. The lights began to dim.

‘Okay, okay. Tilani van Dijk. That’s me.’

Ludicrously they shook hands. Benny reached into the case and drew out a sword. It was light and easy to handle with a thin, slightly curved blade. ‘Let’s teach them a few things about honour,’ she said.

She reached down for a second weapon and passed it to Tilani.

‘It’s theatrical,’ shouted Tilani over the drums. ‘Just wood. Not real.’

Benny looked at the painted stick. ‘Oh, bugger,’ she said.

Cymbals crashed in their ears. The drums almost burst themselves.

Out from behind the cases stumped the demon. Not a silhouette shadow monster, but an ogre of solid, snarling flesh, armoured in plates of jade. Two thick horns sprouted from its wide blue head. Its eyes bulged and its mouth grinned wide with clacking fangs. Its white

mane reached down to its belt.

Darkness piled in behind it as it loomed over them. It slashed at Benny with massive talons. She ducked under the blow, hitting up at the monster with the wooden sword. It bounced off uselessly, clattering to the floor. Benny tried to reach the weapon, keeping low, but the demon blocked her, bellowing as it made to stamp on her outstretched arm.

Benny snagged herself on one of the cases, lost her footing and hit the floor. The barrage of drums was rolling in and out, giving a continuous accompaniment to the fight. She rolled over to see the underside of the ogre's foot rising above her.

The monster gave a sudden roar of fury and staggered backwards.

Tilani was striking repeatedly at its flank with her sword. She seemed less terrified than really angry with the brute. She danced back and forth, avoiding the talons, able to dart in and out between the cases.

She was leading it up the room away from Benny. But it was clear that she was working herself into a corner.

Benny ran for the door, yanked at it again, set the wooden sword to it, tried to lever it open. The blade splintered and snapped.

In desperation, she spun round and saw the vidcom on the wall.

She grabbed the hand receiver and stabbed repeatedly at the button marked *Room Service*.

There was a shriek from the end of the room. Tilani had lost her sword too. The demon loomed over her in the shadows. It was laughing a huge thunderous belly-born laugh. The drums rolled triumphantly.

Benny snatched up the discarded sword case and ran at the creature with it. She swung the case onto the monster's head. It had little effect, apart from distracting the demon and allowing Tilani to duck for cover behind a heavy duty steel cabinet.

The monster rounded back on Benny. She swung the case again, but it was flipped aside with a sweep of the demon's arm. The blow wrenched Benny's shoulder. She tripped and tumbled backwards. As the brute loomed victoriously, she saw the steel cabinet tilt and fall sideways. It crashed against the monster, its door flailing open.

Benny felt a rush of cold air. Little boxes were falling and breaking all round her. Tinny objects spilled across the floor. A vast darkness avalanched over her and she tumbled into nothingness.

Benny was back in her room when she woke up. At first, she thought she'd been dreaming again, but then she tried to move and a spasm cut through her shoulder like a knife. She remembered everything and swore loudly.

'That'll teach you,' said Ivo and his head appeared upside down from the top bunk.

'Sorry for the goddamn profanity,' she said. 'How the hell did I get back here?'

'You rang for Room Service.'

'Ah.' Now she remembered. 'Deluxe apartment 3. And you came?'

'You were lying in a pile of silkworm larvae. They were crawling all over you.'

'Oh, yuck,' she said. 'Sorry, but do you think we could conduct the rest of this conversation with you up the right way?'

He flipped off the top bunk, performing a sort of mid-air somersault in the process, and sat neatly down on the edge of the bed.

'At the risk of sounding unduly flippant,' Benny continued, 'was there a multi-storey demon lying on top of me? Collapsed, I should add. We weren't that well acquainted.'

Ivo shook his head.

'No one there?' said Benny incredulous. 'No demon? No Iwafuji?'

'Only the chorister,' he said.

'Eh?'

'A blue Altairean woman. Uses Chanel No, 465. But she wasn't on top of you. She dashed out of the apartment as soon as I arrived.'

'That was Tilani,' guessed Benny.

'She's a member of the Ladies Choir.'

'Oh, is she now? The New Gondwana Ladies Glee Choir?' Benny sighed. They were nearly short of a soprano after tonight. If it still is tonight.'

'It's tomorrow,' he said. 'It's five thirty tomorrow morning. You slept right through. The Garners and I got you back here on a luggage trolley.'

'Ah,' said Benny. 'I didn't sing all the way home, did I?'

'No,' he answered.

She lay back and groaned. 'I need to speak to Tilani. I'm going to need an alibi when the claims for damage come in.'

Ivo reached a long furry arm up to the top bunk and pulled down a banana for her.

'The Garners wanted to fetch the ship's doctor's he said. 'I explained your predicament and, of course, they offered to foot the bill. Don't

worry. I put them off that. You had a quiet night. We both sat with you.'

'You're too good to me,' Benny said and squeezed his leathery hand. 'You told me not to go back to that apartment.'

'It's up to you.'

'You must think I'm going crazy. I'd certainly lay good odds on it.'

'Of course you're not.' His huge eyes were getting damp. He sniffled and looked away.

'But I'm right. It was Iwafuji. She even admitted as much. Tilani'll tell you. Goddess, that old witch is venom on legs...' She faltered.

'Hang on a minute. Who's *we*? Who sat up with me?'

'Another friend of yours,' said Ivo. He looked round at a small figure who was sitting on a stool in the shadowy corner.

'Hello, dear,' said the old lady from the library. 'I brought my kettle.'

'Bloody hell,' snapped Benny. 'Have you told the whole ship?'

Ohatsu's green tea did the job again. It cleared Benny's head, booting out the shadowy doubts that always hung around at three in the morning threatening to turn into despair.

Ivo had scuttled off for the breakfast shift early. He had been quiet and polite. It would be a busy day. There were no excursions or day trips until the *Prince of Mercury* reached Proxima Xaynor late tomorrow. The liner's itinerary cheerfully stated that passengers' time was their own today, which meant that the ship would be full of bored people with nothing better to do than order food in their rooms.

'The cut stone is bright, but the uncut rock keeps its twinkle to itself,' observed Ohatsu and she topped up their tea cups.

Benny was grateful to have another listener, of course she was, but she had plans too and she wasn't convinced, unlike the old lady, that tea was the answer to everything.

Ohatsu had been closing the library for the night when Benny had been trundled past on the luggage trolley. She had joined the little group and cleaned up the scratches on Benny's face once they got back to the room.

'Struth,' Benny said, touching her cheek. 'I'd forgotten about that.'

Ohatsu held up a mirror and Benny saw that the red wheal below her eye was already dry and healing.

So she related the story again. She was refining the detail down to essentials and bullet points by now. Ohatsu listened intently, nodding as Benny told her about the dig on Jaiwan and the debacle that led to Lola's death. 'And you blame yourself,' she said. 'No wonder you are tired.'

'Tired and very, very angry,' said Benny and she went on about

getting a ticket on the ship and Mrs Montcalme and Iwafuji.

At the mention of the housekeeper, a shadow passed over Ohatsu's face. 'That one. That vicious, impious spider. Oh, how we are all knotted in her poisoned web.'

'You've met her then,' said Benny.

Ohatsu was trembling. She put down her cup for fear of dropping it. 'I was in service to my Lady Onoe. She was a lady in waiting at the great palace of the Princess at Kaga Mountain.'

'When was this?' said Benny's inner archivist.

'Time is an untamed horse. He tramples all the world with his iron-shod hooves.'

'That's a long time ago then.'

Ohatsu wiped at her rheumy eyes. 'Lady Onoe was a great beauty. Her hair was raven silk and her skin was soft as peach down. Her heart was as delicate as a wind-flower. She was kind to her old servant. A good mistress. She knew no deceit and never thought to lie.'

You can't have been that old, thought Benny. Not if it was so far back.

'Lady Iwafuji was the head of the household. She had gained great rank, but her heart was black with the dead blood of jealousy.'

'This is the same Iwafuji, I assume.'

'She never changes,' said Ohatsu. 'She despised poor Onoe from the start and decided to destroy her.'

'But was Onoe really such a threat to her?'

'Iwafuji never had to search for her motivation. She saw that Onoe had grace and beauty where she had none. That was excuse enough. She entrusted a precious statue to Onoe for safe keeping, and then she stole it back. She replaced it with a zori sandal and when the loss was discovered, she beat Onoe with the sandal in front of the other ladies. That poor gentle creature. Dishonoured and ridiculed before the household. Do you think she could endure the shame?'

'Oh, no,' said Benny. 'I'm sorry. So very sorry.'

Ohatsu lowered her head. 'She must have seemed so alone. I was there, yet she was so alone. No one should be alone when they make an end.'

Benny reached out and squeezed the old woman's hand. It was rough and hard with years of service. How could it be just coincidence that the two enemies were here on the same ship? And was Benny now party to some sort of vendetta that, for all her sympathy, she did not want to be involved with?

She heard whispering and saw two shadows on the wall.

Silhouettes of women with piled hair and wide robes. One held a fan in front of her face as she whispered to the other.

Ohatsu struggled to her feet, waving her arms at the intrusion.

‘Away, you spirits! Leave us! There’s nothing here for you.’

Somewhere an invisible plucked instrument began to play. The two figures began to dance, stroking the air in wide arcs with their open fans.

‘No!’ shouted Ohatsu. ‘I said begone! Away with you!’

The music stopped. The shadows lowered their arms and stood still, apparently unsure how to react. Then they bowed low and reality seemed to slide back across the wall, hiding them from view.

‘Are you going to tell me what those things are?’ said Benny. ‘Are they in every room or just mine?’

Ohatsu reached for her kettle. ‘No, please,’ Benny insisted. ‘No more tea. Just tell me what those things are.’

The old woman sat down again. A weight seemed to bow her shoulders. ‘They come from another place. We only see the shadows they cast into our world from their own plane of light. Our world is a toy to them. They like to play games and dress up. Either Iwafuji found them or they found her. And now she is in service to them.’

‘I thought she was in service to Hanekawa Goro. That’s who booked the room. Or should that be Mr Dankizo? I can’t work out who’s meant to be in Deluxe apartment 3. Maybe if I ask to see the ship’s manifest...’

Ohatsu gave Benny a pained look. ‘You’ll never see Dankizo. He sees no one.’

‘So he does exist. The Garner brothers said they spoke to him. So why can’t I?’

For a moment, Ohatsu’s voice hardened and grew deeper. ‘Iwafuji will never let you.’

‘Why not?’ protested Benny. ‘Why the hell not? If she’s in service to him...’

Ohatsu shrank again. A study in weary old age. ‘Not any more. It’s all a show. Michio Dankizo, who took in Iwafuji and owns her... he is in her service too.’

‘What? But how can...?’ There seemed to be nothing that was not thick with Iwafuji’s web. Benny took Ohatsu’s hand again. ‘So who the hell is Hanekawa Goro?’

The old woman was trembling. She slowly raised her head to meet Benny’s gaze. A tear ran down her parchment-dry powdered cheek.

And in the light, Benny saw that the wrinkles on her wizened face were drawn on by liner or pencil. It was all facade. All theatrical illusion. ‘It’s me,’ Ohatsu whispered. ‘I am Hanekawa Goro.’

Benny’s only lingering thought was that she couldn’t wait to get to Proxima Xaynor and get off this godawful ship. The old servant’s look was so apologetic that she had no idea how to react. ‘Not to worry,’

she heard herself say. 'I'm sure we can work this through.' Goddess, she thought, I sound like a social interpersonal facilitator.

A loud buzz from the vidcom made her jump. 'Damn!' She let go of the old woman's hand and heaved herself off the bed. She knew what this call might be. She sat in front of the faux window and prepared for the worst.

The pudgy face of Jeffrey O'Coral filled the screen. 'Ms Summerfield? I'd like to see you in my office please.'

'What about?' said Benny, unwilling to waste any niceties on the creep.

'Your remaining time on the ship,' he said. 'As soon as possible. Thank you.' And the line went dead.

'I've a feeling someone's put in a complaint,' Benny said. She massaged her aching shoulder as she turned back to Ohatsu, but the room was empty. The old lady, or whoever she was, had gone, leaving Benny alone with the dirty tea cups.

'Ms Summerfield.' Jeffrey O'Coral sat behind his desk, sipping a glass of coffee. It's not your lucky day, is it?

'Whatever,' said Benny. She had been trying to rehearse excuses all the way up from the cabin, but all she could think of was Hanekawa Goro. Was little old Ohatsu really a man who painted himself up as an old lady? An old servant who lived for revenge against the woman who caused her mistress's suicide? It sounded like old-style opera, all grand emotions and spilling blood, yet Iwafuji, the object of Ohatsu's vendetta, was real and hateful enough. Was the ship really full of dancing shadows and stage demons, and women who were men?

Onnagata. That was the word she'd been after. All women in Kabuki theatre were traditionally played by men. Like pantomime in kimonos. Or was it just in Benny's head? Fantasy and reality were running and smudging together, all different colours like spilled paint.

'We were going to let you off the liner at Proxima Xaynor,' said Jeffrey O'Coral. He revealed the sort of gracious smile that kills houseplants and frightens kittens. 'However, as you'll have seen from the passenger bulletins, there has been a change of plan.'

'What?' said Benny. If this man pricked up her hackles any more, she would turn into a porcupine. Or maybe a concubine. Or both.

He dunked a chocolate biscuit in his coffee, she suspected mainly to annoy her. 'One of those occasional escalations in the war means that our course has been unavoidably diverted. Proxima has been designated a grade 3 theatre of potential combat. Our next proper portfall will be in three days at Old Moses in the Sinai System.'

'I bet that's going down well with the passengers,' said Benny.

'Amongst whose number you, regrettably, do not count.'

‘I don’t get a refund then,’ she said. ‘How about the shadows? Who pays them?’

His smile was unstoppable. ‘Solarfleet regret that now the cruise has diverged from its original course, we can no longer subsidise your passage.’

‘You’re joking,’ Benny said. ‘What do you want? An extra skivvy in the kitchens cleaning out the guinea pigs?’

‘Oh please, Ms Summerfield. A supply ship will be docking with us to replenish our stock for the diverted cruise. They have agreed to offer you a berth back to their base.’

‘And where’s that?’

‘Semulga Crossways, where we hope you will find another more suitable flight. And of course, you’ll be able to talk to the instation consulate about your loss of identity.’

‘But that’s where I started out from,’ protested Benny. ‘You can’t send me back there. There’s got to be another way. It was you who lost my ID in the first place. You admitted it!’

That inane smirk of his hardly shifted. ‘Well, I confess that there may be an alternative.’

‘There’d better be.’

‘Let’s see, shall we?’ He dabbed at a panel on his desk. ‘Miss Van Dijk, would you like to join us.’

The door behind him opened and Tilani, the woman trapped in Deluxe 3, sauntered in. Benny forced back a snort of laughter. Tilani’s loose blouse was open to the navel. She scarcely took her eyes off Jeffrey Thick-Wrists and he hardly took his eyes off her décolletage.

He also turned a vivid pink, which went quite well with her ample expanse of blue-bronze skin.

‘Miss Van Dijk is a member of the Ladies Choir,’ he simpered. ‘She was trying to contact you, but obviously due to the ID problems...’

Tilani smiled sweetly, but she never turned away from the goggle-eyed Jeffrey. ‘Bernice, we understand that you have certain problems with your status, financial and otherwise. So we’d like to offer you a position in the choir.’

It’s a difficult thing trying to keep your mouth shut when your jaw has just hit the carpet. Benny spluttered and managed, ‘Well... I mean... but... Me?’

‘Come along now and we can discuss it. I’m sure it’ll be just fine.’

Her accent put an emphasis on high-rise terminals – a sure phonetic sign of the older pioneers. Every statement sounded irritatingly like a question, as if she was checking she was using the right words. But who was Benny to argue?

‘Fine,’ she said.

‘Thanks, Jeffrey.’ Tilani leaned ever so slowly across the desk in

front of Jeffrey O’Coral and scooped up the paperwork. ‘Are these Bernice’s documents?’

Benny thought she saw one of his blood vessels burst.

‘Lovely,’ he rasped. His fingers were smeared with chocolate.

‘He knew you were there,’ complained Benny. ‘All the time, he knew. Bastard!’

‘He’s a creep,’ said Tilani. She was buttoning her blouse as they headed along the observation deck 4 in the direction of the Beach. ‘So are you on for this? I owe it to you. Specially if it gets you out of trouble.’

‘Well, I would be...’

‘I detect a but.’

Benny stopped. ‘I don’t want to let you down, but the thing is... I can’t sing for toffee.’

‘Toffee is not a problem,’ said Elsa Gibichung. The Director of the New Gondwana Ladies Glee Choir wore a busy multicoloured one-piece swimsuit, a matching headscarf and sun glasses. She creaked back in her deckchair and gazed out to sea. The deep blue water extended about 50 metres to a sky-blue horizon wall where the waves started. The sun, permanently at its zenith, was hot, but not burning. A gentle breeze ruffled the line of strategically placed palm trees. The Beach, which took up a large proportion of deck 7, was very exclusive, open only to the highest-rated passengers. For the rest, there were the viewing galleries in the sky at the back.

Benny, who had taken her shoes and socks off, wriggled her toes into the pink coral sand. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘But I still can’t understand why.’

Her host was still gazing out at the horizon. ‘For rescuing Tilani, of course.’

‘You know about that?’

‘Of course,’ said Elsa. ‘We don’t have secrets in the choir.’

Ah, thought Benny. She felt like a complete outsider – too many clothes, no tan.

Tilani, stripped to a miniscule bikini, had scampered off to play volleyball on the edge of the surf with a growing group of beachboys.

Swimmers bobbed amongst the waves, and a gaggle of lavender-based lifeforms, who never ventured across the splashline, sat in judgement from the safety of their deckchairs.

On a towel a little way off sat a hefty figure in a watoozi shirt, his head crowned by an auburn hairpiece of elaborate concept and execution. Even from the back, Benny recognised ageless crooner Brad Caramel, aka Erik Inkerstrom, and knew that she was moving in circles of the highest exclusivity. Her Mum would have loved it.

'I thought Tilani rescued me,' she said.

'Variations on a theme,' said Elsa. 'She has her version. You have yours.'

'And I mean it. I don't sing.'

'Not even in the shower? I'd say you were a mezzo.'

'Showers don't count. Nor do luggage trolleys. Sorry, but I'm wasting your time.'

A little figure in full waiter's gear trudged flat-footed across the sand. It was poor old Audrey carrying a tray of tall blue cocktails.

'Hello, duck,' she said. 'Here's your drinks.'

The tray sprouted legs and Audrey set it down between the deckchairs. 'Three Vishnu's Moonrises. And a note for you, dear.' She winked saucily at Benny. 'Be gentle with him. He's such an innocent soul.' Then she turned and trudged back across the sand, kicking away a beachball that bounced into her path.

Benny unfolded the paper and her heart sank a little. *Early dinner Our place. 1700 hrs. Ivo.*

'How flattering,' said Elsa, reading over her shoulder. 'I wouldn't normally approve of dinner before a concert. It clogs up the diaphragm and excites the phlegm. But in your case...'

'Please listen,' moaned Benny. 'I don't sing.'

Elsa started to laugh. 'Heavens, what's that got to do with it?' She took a sip of her cocktail and watched as the liquor changed from deep blue to silver like a moon rising. 'Don't worry about the singing. Just mime it. Or keep your mouth shut. There are forty in the choir, but only about two-thirds of them actually sing anything at all.'

Benny couldn't believe it. 'Why? What's it all for?'

Her host lowered her glass. 'Solidarity. We have to stick together.'

'Against men?' Benny asked. She watched the crowd of boys, whooping and strutting around Tilani.

'I suppose they all come into the equation somewhere. But I meant one man in particular. My husband. That bastard, Michio Dankizo.'

'Is that why Tilani was in Deluxe apartment 3?'

'Possibly.' Elsa removed her sunglasses. She studied Benny with hard green, brown eyes. 'So what were you doing there?'

Oh my Goddess, thought Benny. She thinks I'm involved. She thinks I'm her husband's bit on the side. 'Oh, no,' she insisted. 'I think you're digging the wrong ditch here.'

'Am I?'

'Definitely. I've been down a hole on Jaiwan. I wouldn't even know Mr Dankizo if he hit me with a spade.'

'He is the finest Kabuki actor of his generation. Of many generations. Do you know about Kabuki?'

'A bit.' Benny stared out at the bathers. 'Earth heritage culture.'

Ancient Japanese stylised form of drama. The *Onnagata*. But it's not my area. And neither are other people's husbands.' She shifted her gaze to the beach itself. The sand gleamed beneath the thatched umbrellas. The idle LBLs soaked up the *faux* sunlight and two shadows knelt and bowed, serving each other tea in little bowls.

In the box gallery set high on the wall of the sky, a tall figure in a golden kimono stood amongst the on-lookers. Benny shuddered under her scrutiny. There,' she pointed up. 'It's her. It's his housekeeper. That's who's got it in for me.'

Elsa stared up at the gallery. 'I didn't see. Are you sure?'

Benny looked again, but the figure was gone. 'It was her. It was Iwafuji.'

'Oh, yes,' said Elsa, angry as hell. 'I'm sure it was. It always is.'

It had suddenly gone quiet on the beach. Groups of bathers huddled and pointed upwards. Other oblongs of light were sliding open in the sky walls like the windows in an old-style Advent calendar, like viewing galleries breaking through from another world.

They were lined with the silhouettes of armoured warriors. The shadow warriors raised ancient longbows and levelled them at the crowd below.

People started to run for cover. A rain of shadow arrows began to race across the sand. Benny grabbed Elsa and pulled her towards the exit.

'Where's Tilani?' Elsa kept saying.

Benny saw Brad Caramel stagger and hit the ground, the shadow of an arrow in his back. Audrey was struggling in their direction, bottle in one hand, invisible arrows clattering off the drinks tray she held over her head. She stumbled and fell. Benny ran out, arrows whizzing across her, and pulled the ancient waitress under cover.

'Bloody hell,' Audrey gasped. She swigged at the bottle of House Red she was meant to be serving. 'This is worse than talent night down Wimpleton Palais.' And then Tilani fell in beside them too. She clung to Elsa in fright. Her arm was bleeding.

'This has gone too far,' Elsa told them. 'Far too far. It's time we stopped this once and for all.'

Once ship security had closed the beach area off, the shadow warriors lost interest and shut their windows in the sky. The shadow arrows just faded away, but insubstantial as they looked, they had been lethal. From what Benny heard, three people were dead and five more hurt. Tilani went for stitches at the ship's surgery. Audrey polished off the bottle.

Fresh orders came from the Captain. Solarfleet apologised for any inconvenience caused. Passengers were asked to restrict their movements around the ship to the minimum. Any sightings of the shadows must be referred to security.

Elsa was asked to cancel the night's concert. She refused on the grounds that ship's morale needed raising. She issued instructions that the Choir were to meet at the Assembly Hall at 19.30 hours for a briefing.

Benny, her thoughts jangling and with three hours to spare, went to the library. The cupboard was bare. No sign of Ohatsu. She sat at the library port and googled Michio Dankizo. There were 18,755 hits. The first entry stated that this celebrated actor had played his first Kabuki role at the age of 19 in the Earth year 1790.

Benny read and re-read the entry. 1790. It was an error. It must be.

How could anyone, apart from Brad Caramel, be nearly 800 years old? (Shame on you, Benny. The late Mr Inkerstrom is lying in the fridge at this moment, next to the smoked salmon. The partnership is over. His wig faces a solo career.)

1790. When you're in shock, things can take a while to make sense.

1790! Her blood ran cold and her head went into superlight. Dankizo was married to Elsa Gibichung, but he was in service to Iwafuji. Or was that vice versa? Iwafuji could summon demons and was in league with the shadows, who were running amok on the ship. She had shadows in her eyes and a trickle of blood on her mouth. She and Dankizo were both bloodsucking monsters...

She started to check the other entries... and then realised her error.

Call yourself an archaeologist, Benny Summerfield? Michio Dankizo was a stage name. A dynasty of stage names. Michio Dankizo I began his career in 1790. Elsa's husband was Michio Dankizo XXVIII and played his first role in 2519, 21 years before Benny was born.

Okay, calm down, she thought. She was overwrought and overtired.

Overwrought? She was bloody uberwrought! It was an easy enough mistake to make. She bet these entries were full of inaccuracies. But that didn't change all the stuff about Iwafuji. She was still a bloodsucking monster. So that was all right then.

She wished Ohatsu was here to make the tea and idly tapped in her name.

3,298 hits. *Ohatsu: Character in the Kabuki loyalty play 'Kagamiyama Kokyono Nishiki-e' (Tribulations of the Kaga Family: A Women's Treasury of Loyalty). A courageous servant of the lady-in-waiting Onoe who seeks revenge on the villainous lady Iwafuji who drove her mistress to suicide.*

If Hanekawa Goro was living out the *onnagata* role of Ohatsu, avenger and tea-lady *extraordinaire*, then his mortal enemy Iwafuji was here on the ship too. Benny tapped in *Iwafuji* and added *Dankizo XXVIII*.

344 hits. *Michio Dankizo XXVIII: celebrated Kabuki actor. Blah blah blah, loads of biographic detail Most renowned for his role as the wicked Iwafuji in 'Kagamiyama Kokyono Nishiki-e'!*

It was one of those moments that archaeologists dream about. A Howard-Carter-opening-the-tomb moment when things all slot neatly together, no pins, no glue and the jackpot spills out round your ankles. Goro is Ohatsu, Dankizo is Iwafuji. Mortal enemies. Two old actors so deep in their roles that their true personalities were drowned. This was the past keeping itself alive, not dry and dusty, not catalogued and mummified in a glass case. It was stomping about, swishing its silk robes and lashing out its talons, defying the downhill avalanche of time.

Benny felt jealous, inspired and rather moved.

'The path to truth is ill lit. Fate is the puppeteer in the shadows,' whispered a voice at Benny's shoulder. Ohatsu was there. She or He looked nervous. The costume was in disarray, the make-up smudged.

'Hide yourself, Bernice,' gasped the character.

'Ohatsu?' said Benny. 'Or is that you, Hanekawa?'

'Hide yourself. They are coming!' He reached into his sleeve and produced a little figurine in gold. 'Keep this, for me. Don't lose it.'

Benny weighed the statue. It was heavy. From outside she heard the sound of a sliding door. A roll of drums and many footsteps. 'Is Iwafuji after you?' she said.

'Stay out of sight. It is Ohatsu that they seek.' He half-bowed as he turned and ran from the room. Benny heard gruff shouts outside. She stuffed the statue into her hold-all and pressed herself against the wall.

Armoured shadows flicked across the doorway. Shadows sent by Iwafuji. There was a loud cry from the distance. Someone in pain.

Gruff voices laughed and a door slid shut.

After a moment of quiet, Benny edged to the door and peered out.

The lobby was deserted. Ohatsu was taken. She hefted the bag onto her shoulder and hurried for the safety of her room.

When she opened the door, she saw Ivo sitting on the bed. He immediately looked away from her and made awkward snuffling noises.

Shit, she thought, knowing that she was at least half an hour late.

There was a large trolley parked in the corner. It was topped by a gleaming metal dome.

‘Ivo, I’m really, really sorry. I couldn’t get through. The passages. Those shadow things everywhere.’ She put the bag with the statue down in a shadowy corner. She was sure he could smell her lying.

‘As long as you’re safe,’ he said quietly and crossed to the trolley.

She said nothing.

He drew back the lid to reveal an array of dishes. ‘I thought that before you left you should have at least one decent meal.’ Haute cuisine, garnished and presented in a style that only deluxe passengers can afford. Chef owed him a few favours, he admitted, but declined to say what.

Benny didn’t know how to thank him, other than to guiltily confess that she wasn’t leaving yet after all.

‘No?’ he said and his tail, free of his suit, lifted along with his mood.

He sat her down and dimmed the light. Immediately the *faux* window began showing one of those ambience vids of a candelabra. It filled the room with a golden glow. Ivo poured her a large glass of red wine, fruity and clean, and started to serve dinner with the full panoply of silver service. Fresh vegetable soup, some sort of poached fish with a sauce of tart green fruit, a galantine of spiced game meats with a green salad flecked with peppery orange petals.

She tried to put Ohatsu’s fate out of her mind. The wine helped.

Ohatsu/Goro might not be dead at all. What did she know? She ate surprisingly well, realising how absolutely ravenous she was.

Ivo watched with doleful, glassy eyes, nibbling at a solitary banana, holding it delicately in his spindly fingers. Benny thought of how little they had talked, how little she knew about his mission and belief.

After today’s events, everything was suddenly precious. When might she have another chance to find out about him?

‘Me?’ he said and topped up her glass. ‘I’m just as silly as a green banana.’

‘But what about your home on Earth? You must remember Madagascar. Sorry, Malagascar. And have pictures of your family?’

‘We have a creation story,’ he said. ‘That’s all.’

‘Go on then,’ she said. It was an escape. She sipped her wine and prayed he would talk for ever.

‘It goes like this. Once there were some banana seeds, all new and full of sap and hope. And when the sun got up and walked across the sky, the seeds all reached for him saying, “I’ll be the biggest with the

greenest leaves and grab the sun and play catch with him.” But there was one banana seed who said, “I do not want to go up there where the crafty wind shreds my leaves to tatters and the sun scorches me.” So he grew downwards instead. He stayed low in the shade. And while the other bananas grew up into fine tall trees and had families of baby green bananas, the little banana who stayed by the ground grew wide and fat and wisest and brownest of all. And everyone forgot all about him.’

‘This is a stock 3.2 creation myth,’ said Benny. ‘The plants as an atavistic God.’ She noted Ivo’s reproving look. He was scrunched up on his chair, his knees clutched under his chin. Almost fetal. ‘Sorry. Please go on.’

‘The earth got browner and the sun got sillier and the forest was busy growing. Then one day a new tree appeared and grew bigger than all the others. It had bunches of the strangest bananas that the silly sun had ever seen – all knobbly and full of elbows. The other trees laughed at the new tree and refused to talk to it. But then the knobbly bananas burst open and all the new-born lemurs jumped out and laughed back at the other trees.’

‘That’s different,’ said Benny, but Ivo held up a hand.

‘It was the laughter that did it. So magical and funny that the other banana trees joined in too and shared their banana fruit with the lemurs. So the whole forest of the world was happy.’

‘Ahh,’ Benny cooed. ‘Nothing malicious or dark. No quasi-satanic manifestations. I definitely like it.’

‘You think we’re bumpkins, don’t you?’ said Ivo.

‘No, actually,’ she insisted pouring another glass of wine. ‘The myth’s simplicity is refreshingly unique. An enduring Eden.’

‘Myth?’ he said, puzzled. ‘Anyway one day, in between the laughing, one of the older bananas was thinking and she remembered the little brown banana who didn’t want to play catch with the sun.

“Whatever happened to him?” she said.

“He’s still here,” said the knobbly tree who was mother to all the lemurs. “Why do you think we’re all laughing?”

“Where?” said the banana trees and they looked around and up at the sky, but could they see him? “He’s not here,” they said. “He never grew up. He’ll be old and shrivelled by now.”

“I’m down here,” said a deep brown voice. So they looked down round their feet, but they still couldn’t see him. “Down here,” said the voice, and the banana trees felt a tingling in their toes.’

‘Got it,’ sang Benny. ‘I know the answer.’ She was concentrating hard to get the words in the right order. The wine was slamming in more than she expected. She reckoned Ivo had known that all along, and by now she was past caring. As it was, he seemed determined to

finish the story.

“But there’s nothing but earth,” said the trees.

“I’m here. Don’t you recognise me?” called the tingly brown voice. “While you had your noses in the air, I stayed by the ground and got bigger and wider and fatter. As big as an island. And now you’re all my children. My name is Malagascar and I’m your mum. And he laughed and the lemurs and bananas laughed too. And then the humans arrived and got the name wrong and burnt down all the forests to grow bread.’

Benny sighed. ‘I knew someone would ruin it.’

‘And the bread was rubbish too,’ added Ivo, ‘until the French turned up with their baguettes and croissants.’

‘Sometimes I’m ashamed to be human,’ apologised Benny.

“Scuse me, that’s one of my parents you’re talking about,’ Ivo said, but his eyes danced with the candlelight. ‘Don’t you have any beliefs?’

‘Oh, loads,’ she confessed, leaning closer. ‘There’s St Indiana for starters, patron saint of archaeologists. When I get to Earth, I thought I’d visit his shrine at Holywood. They’ve got his hat among the relics. Not so sure about the Goddess though, but she makes a good expletive.’

Ivo produced a little covered dish from the trolley, holding it out like a prize for her. Droplets of condensation covered its silver lid, shimmering with a hundred tiny reflected flames. He lifted the cover to reveal two globes of white gold. ‘Fresh ice cream flavoured with pods from the Vanilla Coast on Malagascar. It’s like eating at home again.’

One of the screen candles guttered out, drifting curls of smoke across the window. The shadows in the corners darkened.

Benny leaned still closer. ‘You’ll find your new home one day.’

There was a deep down, dark green-brown earthiness in him. Surely that was what he was looking for. He carried it inside him, but he couldn’t see for looking. She wanted to nestle into that deep down dark earthiness.

‘It’s the high tree tops that I miss,’ he whispered. ‘The pale green light in the canopy.’ The white downy fur on his arms gleamed, every hair standing out. ‘And the birds who nest in the sun. And the beetles and grubs busy on the forest floor.’

Ivo FitzIndri, lost prince of the Half-Dead, you are so lovely, she thought. So beautiful. So lost. She needed his touch and his tail curled round her.

The second candle flickered out. They were down to just one glimmer in the clustering dark. The rest of the world was shut out by a wall of watching shadows. ‘It’s out there somewhere,’ Ivo said. ‘Our home. I’ll find it somewhere.’

Come over here, she thought, drunk from watching his eyes, his fur. And she reached out to kiss him before it was too late.

He pulled back awkwardly. There was ice cream trickling on his fingers. 'We have to find it,' he said. It was almost a defence.

'We?' said Benny.

'The Order of Lost Lemuroidea. For whom I took my vows.' His hands came together in a prayer steeple as he counted, finger to finger. 'To seek our new old home. To do no hurt or harm. To forswear all physical knowledge.'

Ah, thought Benny. Conflict of interests going on here.

Ivo looked directly at her across his devotions. 'To honour and commit our lives to those who may show the way.'

'I hate family,' she said, hardly noticing. 'What a load of bullies.'

His nose was wet. 'They're all waiting. I have to send a monthly letter home. And my earnings.'

There had been a moment, the possibility of a moment, but it had gone, flown off to its nest in the sun. The clustering dark had dispersed. The room was the room again. Things pass. *Manana, manana*. 'No physical knowledge?' she yawned. 'No wonder you're nearly extinct.'

'Did no one ever break your heart?' he asked after a long pause.

'Oh, yeah. It happens regularly enough to set my PDA by.'

He looked incredulous and pitying. 'So many times? So many betrayals? Do you have any heart left?'

'The first one,' slurred Benny, staring into her empty glass. 'Simon bloody Kyle. You always still love the first one. It always hurts the worst.' And she smiled fondly. 'Sold me out, backstabbing bastard.'

'Don't you want your ice cream?' came his little voice as she started to doze.

In her sleep, she knew her hair was being stroked ever so gently. If it hadn't been for the strong smell of musk, she'd have thought it was her mother.

A buzz from the vid window woke her with a start. 'Benny,' called Tilani's voice. 'We're waiting in the Assembly Hall.'

'Sorry,' croaked Benny and struggled to wake herself up.

Trust her to be late. She splashed her face with water, and changed her top before realising that Ivo and the trolley had gone. The bag sat brooding in the corner. Ohatsu is not alive, it said. Who are you trying to kid?

The vid window buzzed again. 'Are you okay?' said Ivo.

'Yes. Yes, fine.'

'Just don't go out unless you have to.' His eyes were full of concern. 'It's not safe.'

'Okay. I'll be good.' As she flicked off the screen, she caught a sudden whiff of musk. It was clinging to her hair. What had she been lying in? So much for sharing the room with a demi-lemur. She fished out a cheap bottle of perfume and sprayed herself in haphazard abandon. No time for anything else. She grabbed her bag and hurried out into what passed for fresh air.

The passages were empty. Benny reached the lobby below the Hall, when she heard footsteps. She ducked behind a coffee machine as security guards belted past. Above their heads, a star-shaped shadow whirled round the lobby panels and thunked into a far wall. And then another.

This was a new game. Shadows of warriors slid along the walls, laughing with big, aggressive, lion-like guffaws, and slashing the bladed star weapons over their heads. Benny thought of Ohatsu and Brad Caramel and the lady Onoe, all lying dead. A sudden deep anger made her decide to play as well.

She stepped out from hiding. 'Hey!' she called.

The shadows turned and she felt their icy stares. The security officers just gawped, apparently waiting for the game to continue.

Benny steeled herself under the warriors' scrutiny. 'Take a message to the lady Iwafuji. Say that Ohatsu's servant, who has no name, greets her and demands reparation for the blood on her dishonourable hands.'

The shadows' first reaction was to laugh again, but Benny held her ground, trying not to break or move. And it worked! Against her determination, the shadows shut up and finally bowed low in reverent acknowledgement.

Benny bowed back.

Then they turned back to the ship's security officers. The guards had

no weapons against the warriors. Their job was to clear the passages. They turned and ran, helpfully providing just the sort of sport the shadows wanted.

As the chase moved on, Benny, still clutching her bag, hurried up the stairs. She thought she'd gone mad.

'Ouch!' said Benny as they pinned her into a tunic two sizes too big.

The range of Ladies in the Glee Choir covered all ages and a wide array of inter-colonial races, but the mood backstage in the Assembly Hall was mostly sombre, hardly gleeful at all. Tilani, her arm bandaged, was the youngest, and the oldest was a spindly little lady called Dolores with bright eyes and the fruitiest laugh. 'I'm 101 and a quarter,' she told Benny, 'and my husband is forty years younger, the bastard!' The others shushed her up with stern looks.

'They're just jealous,' suggested Benny.

'Oh no, we're not,' chorused the ladies. 'We all know better.'

No one seemed to know what was happening with the liner, although several ladies mentioned rumours that the excursion gondolas were being prepared as lifeboats for an evacuation.

Benny sifted the sheets of music she'd been given. She found the score for the *Okey-dokey* song, but the words weren't half as good as the ones she thought she'd heard. She looked at a sheet headed *Telepathic Chorale*, which was otherwise blank.

'Our most complex piece,' said Dolores and winked saucily. 'Lots of people think it's silent, but no one dares admit to not hearing it.'

'Gotcha,' said Benny. 'It's like the Emperor's New Clothes.'

'But in reverse,' said the ladies.

'That's a very unusual scent,' added Dolores. 'I don't think I recognise it.'

'Old Malagascar,' Benny declared. 'It was a surprise present.'

Elsa Gibichung, resplendent in a black tunic bordered with silver, clapped her hands for attention. 'Come along, ladies. No dallying,' she called. 'First we must welcome the new member I told you about. This is Bernice Summerfield.'

The ladies all applauded.

'Hello,' said Benny, embarrassed.

'Mezzo,' they agreed. 'Definitely a mezzo.'

'Well, I'm not expecting much of an audience in the Hall,' continued Elsa, 'but that's not the point, is it? This is the closest we've been. And we're not going to give up our cause now.'

A murmur of agreement rippled through the ladies. Benny watched Elsa, finding it hard to equate this formidable Teutonic dowager with her married name of Elsa Dankizo, wife of a Kabuki master. The cultures would not slot together. Opposites attract, she reminded

herself. She had a hundred questions, but wheels were turning and this was a time to observe, not to conduct an enquiry.

‘By arrangement with the captain,’ Elsa continued, ‘the concert will be relayed live to all cabins.’

There was another enthusiastic round of applause.

‘So, dear ladies, please take your places.’

They filed out of a side door into the hall itself. A clear domed roof looked up at a canopy of stars that slid overhead. A flat walkway sloped from the auditorium up to the stage where ranks of chairs were set out. ‘Stick with me,’ said Dolores, grabbing Benny’s arm. ‘Crossing the hanamichi always makes me wobbly.’

‘The what?’ said Benny.

‘The bridge by which players traditionally enter and exit the stage,’ said the old lady, clinging on. ‘One world to another.’

‘Is that in Kabuki theatre?’ Benny asked.

Dolores’s grip tightened. ‘Sometimes it feels like there’s nothing else.’

‘Right,’ thought Benny and fished further. ‘What about Elsa’s husband? Wasn’t he in the Kabuki?’

‘Never left it. But surely you know that.’ She sighed and her eyes welled with tears. ‘So dishy, he was. Still is. Even when he plays the *iroaku*, the villain. But we all know about that, don’t we?’ She made her way to the back row and sat Benny down next to her. ‘Oh dear,’ she said and wiped her cheeks with a shaky hand. ‘I suppose a good turn-out was too much to expect.’

The auditorium was almost empty. There were no stewards visible and only three seats were taken. Five rows back in the centre sat the indefatigable shape of Mrs Montcalme, obviously much restored. She was flanked by Gerry and Garry Garner. They both carried palmpads, pointing them round the hall and comparing readings across Mrs M’s ample bosom.

‘At least the rest’ll hear us in their rooms,’ muttered a lady called Fontaine on Benny’s other side. ‘Although they’ll miss the spectacle.’

‘Don’t expect me to sing much,’ apologised Benny.

‘Not to worry,’ whispered Dolores. ‘It’s the thought that’ll count.’

Elsa made her way to the centre of the stage, bowed to the audience of three and composed herself, facing the choir. She eschewed the baton, Benny noticed, apparently preferring to carve the music out of the air with her bare hands.

She nodded to her troops and raised her arms.

The doors of the hall clattered and a group of figures in evening dress filtered in. Elsa dropped her pose and turned to look.

It was the waiters. A troop of at least thirty of them, ushered in by Ivo. The choir started to clap as their unexpected audience settled

themselves down. Several of the waiters actually bowed to the applause. Audrey, Gnorenzo, Peaches and Cardew were all present, and 3adne the cashier, wearing a disdainful look that said, this had better be good. Benny, although grateful for their arrival, wondered if they had nothing better to do. She half-smiled at Ivo, knowing that her subterfuge about staying in the room had been blown before she even started. He smiled back unreservedly.

Elsa bowed to the new arrivals, acknowledging their support. She raised her arms and with a sweep, deployed her forces. The hall filled with a concord of female voices, harmonising, unified and utterly defiant. Benny, who could decipher ancient scripts in a dozen antique languages but couldn't read a note of music or sing for toffee, as she never tired of telling people, was still overwhelmed by a sense of involvement and belonging.

They were into the third song when Benny felt the thrum of the ship's engines change note and start to power down out of superlight. The stars above the clear dome stopped moving. A wailing siren interrupted the music and Captain Sezheremy's voice boomed out of the PA system.

'Ladies and gentleman, attention please. Solarfleet Lines regret that due to unforeseen circumstances, and in consideration of passenger safety, we are reluctantly terminating this cruise. The Prince of Mercury is currently rendezvousing with Naval transports from Applegren Base on Extant 617. Evacuation of passengers will commence immediately. Please carry only essential items in your hand luggage and remain in your rooms until a member of the crew collects you for transfer. All staff must report to their assembly points immediately. Solarfleet Lines apologise for any inconvenience and disruption to your enjoyment. Thank you.'

3adne got up to go. The others pulled him back into his chair. The audience sat tight. They looked expectantly at the choir. Elsa, taking the hint, announced 'Item Number 7,' and launched into a slow lament from The Kamakura Songbook of 2132.

*Summer heat lingers into autumn,
But you are gone.
Fleecy clouds hide the moon.
Geese ride on the back of the wind.
We light lanterns and float them on the water.
We eat chestnuts with the rice.
You are gone, but we are waiting.*

From somewhere came an accompaniment on plucked strings. Shadows began to appear, sliding out of corners and along the

walls.

They were in greater numbers than before and all of them were female. Shadows of women in Japanese dress. Ladies or servants with piled hair and long dangling sleeves. Most stood and listened. Some carried long-stemmed instruments like lutes on which they played.

One lifted her open fan and started to dance, curling it above her head in response to the music.

The universe seemed to hold its breath. The music, unspeakably melancholy and beautiful, raised faces in Benny's thoughts: Mum, Dad, Simon, Lola and Professor Ankola. All of them were lost. She was only 22 and the list was far too lengthy already. She longed to join in the song, but dared not even squeak for fear of shattering something so precious. Come back, it said. I wasn't ready to lose you when you went.

The commitment etched on Elsa's face gave away the purpose of Song No 7. This was her prayer too, calling back what she had lost.

Benny stared round and saw the same fierce longing on the faces of every woman in the choir.

In the audience, the Garner twins were busy scanning the dark figures with their instruments. Drums rolled and screens split open in the gloom, scattering the women, spilling new shapes out along the walls. They were men on horseback carrying long swords.

The choir lost its thread and the music died. As the waiters started to scramble for the doors, the silhouette of the warrior captain lifted his blade in warning. He urged his horse forward and its shadow tore away from its place on the wall, advancing along the rows of chairs towards the waiters. The other horseman started to rip clear of the wall. They began to circle their prisoners, Ivo amongst them, herding them into a tight, petrified huddle. The Garner twins were using Mrs Montcalme as a shield.

Benny tried to stand, but Fontaine and Dolores pulled her back as the black shade of a warrior rode up the walkway to the stage.

There was a squeal from one of the prisoners. 3adne had panicked and tried to run. He tripped and stumbled headlong among the chairs. 'No sale! No sale!' he squealed as the shadow captain loomed over him ready to strike.

'Away!' screamed a voice.

Iwafuji held her pose, framed in the doorway, one hand stretched high. Disembodied voices called out 'Dankizo-ya!' in appreciation.

The shadow warriors quailed before her and struggled to control their frightened horses.

The ladies of the choir kept their places, facing the distant figure, resplendent in her gold kimono. Benny felt her hands squeezed by Dolores and Fontaine and knew that they were all joined in defiance.

Down the central aisle came Iwafuji, almost gliding on the tiniest steps. A fury seemed to drive her, barely controlled beneath her artifice. There was nothing markedly feminine or masculine about this performance. It was contrived in every gesture and tilt of the head. Yet it was fascinating. A work of art that seemed to embody all the venom and spite in the universe at that moment. Nothing could be more hateful.

Elsa was still facing the choir, yet the calm in her eyes matched the rage that drove Iwafuji. It was the will of the choir focused in Elsa like a prism. 'Item number 12 please,' she said. 'The *Chorale Telepathique*.'

She gave a nod to bring them in.

Benny was aware of the silence. A pin dropping would have sounded like a thunderclap, yet the concentration that emanated from the choir was tangible. It filled the air like a rising wave. The shadow figures and their host of prisoners watched, waiting for the tumult to break over them.

Amongst the throng, Benny caught Ivo's stare. How could you miss those eyes? He pointed upwards. She followed his hand and saw a grey cruiser, a Comma31, functional and military, banking high above the dome of the hall.

Elsa turned to face Iwafuji. 'Michio,' she said, 'we have run you to ground at last. It took long enough.'

Nothing shifted the darkness in Iwafuji's eyes. Even from the back row of the choir, Benny could see that this person was not the actor, Michio Dankizo. It was the character of Iwafuji that inhabited and worked his body.

Iwafuji surveyed the choir with contempt. Her red mouth cracked across her deathly white face. 'Peasants! This rabble has no place in my house.'

Dolores's grip on Benny's hand tightened, but the choir's concentration lost none of its force.

'Michio,' Elsa said again. 'Do you remember us?'

The harridan slowly shook her head. 'Outsiders.'

'Michio,' called out all the ladies of the choir.

'Is this a trap?' said Benny. 'You've set this trap to get Elsa her husband back?'

'Silly girl,' hissed Fontaine.

'Not to get him back,' whispered Dolores. 'It's not revenge. We want to rescue him.'

'But why all of you? Why do all this for him?'

Dolores smiled, but her eyes never left Elsa. 'Wouldn't you do the same for your husband?'

Benny's throat dried. She glanced round at the choir, young and old. 'All of you?' she said, incredulous. 'All forty? I thought polygamy was

illegal.'

'Depends where you are or where you come from.'

'But how can a man have forty wives?'

Shapes flickered on the walkway. Not just the waiting horseman, but new shadows appearing. The bridge seemed to stretch away as a new horizon opened with the swish of a silk curtain. Dark shapes moved back and forth across the great span, entering our world and leaving for another. The shadow figures in the hall began to tear away from the walls into the room. They clustered round Iwafuji like dark spirits round their witch.

'Concentrate!' hissed several of the ladies.

The air was starting to hum. One note pulsing gently into Benny's head, slowly blossoming into a chord.

'Do we mean nothing to you?' called Elsa. 'The abandoned souls who have searched for you? Years of searching! We've invested every last credit we had on detectives and post-hounds. But you ignored us. And no wonder, the bad company you've been keeping.' She advanced to the front of the stage, pointing to the bridge. 'Tell these shadow creatures of yours to go. They don't belong here. We have opened the way. Send them back. You belong with us, Michio. To your wives!'

The hum of the *Chorale Telepathique* swelled and the shadows edged back, unnerved before the choir's tirade.

The Housekeeper remained indifferent. Elsa's plea had been addressed to Michio Dankizo. What had that to do with her? She had been slowly surveying the ranks of the choir, and finally her eyes locked on Benny.

'You,' she said. 'Child of a peasant. You dared challenge me.'

Benny rose from her chair, but she still clung tightly to Dolores and Fontaine. 'My father was a great commander. You're just an overblown housemaid.'

Iwafuji grimaced as if she had a mouthful of vinegar. 'And so a mighty warrior is dishonoured by his worthless daughter.'

'You reckon?' Benny said. 'Well, I'm not one of your deserted wives. That's their problem.' She ignored the murmur of shock that ran across the choir. 'Sit down, sit down!' called several ladies.

'Concentrate!' urged Elsa, but already the shadows were starting to creep back.

Benny pulled free of her fellow choristers. 'Where's Ohatsu?' she demanded of Iwafuji. 'Where's Hanekawa Goro? Is he dead? Have you sucked his blood too?'

'Sit down!' they all shouted. The chorale fell apart. Immediately, shadows were feeding across the hall, cutting between Iwafuji and the stage.

Iwafuji threw her head back and laughed. 'Would that she was! But

as I live, our accursed feud can never die.'

For a moment, he seemed to rise in the air, and then Benny saw that he was being lifted by the shadows. They were carrying him towards the bridge.

There were cries of 'No!' and 'Michio!' from the choir. The women were clambering along rows and over chairs.

'Leave him!' shouted Elsa Gibichung. 'He's ours!' She started to run, but the horseman turned and struck her down with one sweep of his sword.

Elsa hit the floor in a spray of blood. There was a collective scream from the choir. Benny grabbed up her bag. As she forced her way through the turmoil, the siren sounded again.

'Assistance is required. All remaining staff must report to appointed areas immediately. Stage 1 evacuation has already commenced.'

A high-pitched whooping yowl cut across the siren. Perched on the back of a seat in the stalls, Ivo had lifted his head in a territorial proclamation of both misery and tribute for the fallen.

Benny saw that Iwafuji was already being carried shoulder-high across the bridge. Overhead, another grey cruiser was wheeling in space above the dome.

A deep boom shuddered up from somewhere in the bowels of the liner and the whole vessel lurched violently. Struggling to stay upright, Benny saw Ivo pull free of the corralled waiters and come leaping across the chair tops towards her, and then her own feet parted company with the floor.

Everything was moving and floating. Ivo was paddling in the air above the fixed seats in the hall. The ladies of the choir, the free-standing chairs on the stage, the gaggle of waiters, all lost their weight and balance, catching in free-float tangles in the air. Elsa's body lifted from the floor, spilling bubbles of blood.

The liner's gravity generators had failed. Only the shadows, cast from elsewhere, kept their weight. The party carrying Iwafuji was already far along the hanamichi, heading across the bridge with no parapet for the dimension that cast the shadows. Benny tried to strike out after them, but flailed uselessly, turning somersaults in the air.

The ship seemed to flicker round her. Only the bridge was sharp and solid, but out of reach. Upside down, she saw the shadow of the horseman bearing in on her. He snatched at her bag, but she clung on, dragged behind him, up through the air onto the bridge. She lost her grip, spinning wildly in the air, grabbing at the bridge's edge as it passed below her. But her fingers barely grazed it. The sky opened under her as she fell towards it. It was a black canvas, flecked with painted stars. And she hit it so hard she bounced.

Benny woke on the cabin floor. The lack of engine noise woke her. It made her uneasy. No noise is good noise, her dad had said, but she'd been at the raucous age of five and he thought he was being funny. Wrong on both counts, Admiral. No noise was not good.

Then she realised that she had her weight and gravity back, and the floor was inexplicably covered in straw matting. She'd just woken from the great grandpa of all nightmares, full of shadows and horsemen, choirs and Comma31 transports, and she wished she hadn't remembered the bit about Elsa Gibichung getting sliced up.

'You can't control dreams,' added her mother helpfully. They're just your brain's way of working out problems.' But it wasn't a dream, was it? The real world of rational scientific fact was far more implausible. She'd fallen off a bridge in another dimension and landed back here. It was all real, however crazy. Mum could lecture all she liked. And now Benny had the great granny of all headaches to match, so it was turning into a real family party.

She cranked herself up on her elbows and looked round. Her shoes were gone and her feet were bare. No shoes anywhere. Everything else was in place. Her bag sat in the corner where she'd left it, next to Ivo's neatly folded blankets. But the ship's power must be low, because the lighting made the room look flat. And the air tasted oddly fresh, not dry from the ship's recycle pumps.

Her shoulder ached. It had been wrenched by the implausible shadow of a samurai on a shadow horse, who had tried to steal her bag. Thanks, Mum. Pass that one on to Sigmund Freud if you dare.

She stood up with difficulty and her head swam. The perspective was wrong. Nothing changed when she moved. She reached for the edge of the bunk to steady herself, but her hand splayed out against a hard, flat surface. The solid shape of the bunk was not there. It had been replaced by the likeness of the bunk. A flat artistic approximation of the bunk painted on the wall. No, not even the wall.

It was painted, beautifully described in fine brushstrokes, on a taut screen that had replaced the wall, that gave just a little when she leant on it.

She reached for the door, but it was painted too, flat on the screen with no suggestion of a real way out. She ran her hand slowly along the surface, over the painted likenesses of every other item in the room. Bunk, chairs, curtained *faux* window, even the stack of blankets, were painted flat on the walls. The light was painted on the dingy ceiling. Only she, her crumpled bag and the mats had shape and existed inside the closed space.

She started to panic, pushing at the walls of her prison, trying this way and that, giving them all her weight. But they held fast. As she pushed again, the matting slid under her feet, toppling her sideways.

She hit the floor and lay still. She hated everything and everyone and wanted to get back to them more than anything.

She belonged with Ivo and the choir, beyond reach and hope on a scuppered ship in another dimension. This was not home at all. The Ardjian Scientists say that if you die by mistake, the future you should have had flashes before you as well as your past. But how the hell did they know about that?

Silk rustled. A shadow was moving along the screen right beside her. A woman in Japanese robes, taking tiny steps. Benny had no idea if the shadow was in the room with her, or if someone was actually passing by outside. She started to yell for help, but there was no response. She scrambled to the edge of the screen, the end of the painted bunk, where the shadow had vanished, and set her fingers to the angle.

The wall gave slightly. Benny worked her fingers so hard, she thought they might burst. The wall inched out a fraction and then snapped back. Exasperated, she stared down at her feet. There was a little black bolt in the corner. She reached down and lifted it easily out of its slot. The painted wall rumbled aside on well-oiled runners.

The ship's corridor outside was gone. Benny stepped through into another room. It was clean and bright. The furnishings were minimal.

There was matting underfoot with a low couch and a small table. On the table stood an onion vase with a single sprig of pink blossom.

She tried to touch the delicate flowers, and the illusion went flat, just like the other room, everything was painted on the wall screens.

Benny found the bolt in the corner and slid aside the partition.

In the next room, also clean and bright, there was a bowl of dark red berries on the table. Benny ignored them and looked for the bolt.

As she reached for it, the shadow glided across the screen wall again.

She yanked up the bolt and dragged back the screen.

There was no one in the next room. Only a painting of cranes dancing on the wall.

Benny could do this all day. One more wall, she decided, then she'd resort to violence.

She lifted the next bolt, slid back the screen and stepped through into the most exquisite garden she had ever seen.

The trees were heavy with pink blossom. Branches of maple flickered with young flame-coloured leaves. A river of raked sand curled away under a thicket of green bamboo. In the distance, the curved roofs of a temple rose above the trees. It was false, of course.

The garden was painted on the all-enveloping screens of the place, but it was also alive. The brushstroke stems rustled and swayed in the breeze. Benny heard the clack of a water-driven deer-scarer. A few lines drawn on the sky suggested rain-laden clouds.

A man sat under one of the blossom trees, playing on one of the thin-stemmed lutes. He wore a robe of rich silk. His face was lined, but still handsome and he had a thick sweep of silver hair. His fingers were stained red. Beside him sat a bowl of the dark fruit. He looked up and stopped playing.

‘Michio Dankiso? The 28th, yes?’ asked Benny, remembering to bow. ‘My name is Bernice Summerfield. I don’t suppose you’ve got any spacepirin? My head’s killing me.’

He bowed back. ‘Please, please sit down. You are most welcome.’

He was the embodiment of politeness. ‘Some tea perhaps. Or fresh mulberry juice. I have an orchard here.’ He glanced up at the blossom-laden tree and Benny realised that it was real. Apart from her host, it was the only real thing she had seen in the place. ‘I farm silkworms,’ he said. ‘Mulberry leaves are all they eat. I used to get silks from Earth but the war makes the shipments unreliable. So now we weave my costumes ourselves.’

Benny struggled to find any words, unsure if this was a trick. Alert codes pinged up in her head warning that this was a man of many faces. ‘Tea please. Thanks.’

He reached out to a low table that Benny had not noticed and poured tea from an earthenware pot. The drink cleared her head immediately. The cups were the same pattern as those that Ohatsu used.

‘Is this your house?’ she said.

He smiled. ‘Oh, yes. My retirement home, too. Or it will be one day, if I’m ever allowed to give up work.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Benny, ‘but I’ve never seen you perform.’

His eyes twinkled with mischief. ‘Nor I you.’

Benny, who was long past getting embarrassed at anything, felt herself turn bright pink. ‘Nothing’s real here,’ she stammered. ‘It’s very beautiful, but artificial. It’s like a maze.’

‘Perhaps I don’t want to leave,’ he said. He passed her the bowl of mulberries. She bit into one of the fruit. It was sweetly rich and succulent and stained her fingers red. ‘The world outside is full of unexpected incident,’ he continued. ‘As an artist, it’s my job to be in control. The roles I play are part of an ancient tradition. Variation in performance must be minimal if I am to achieve perfection.’

‘You’re a servant to your roles,’ said Benny. ‘I can understand that. I’m an archaeologist, so I work with dead things too. It’s all about understanding them and displaying them right.’

He frowned. 'My theatre is very much alive.'

'Yeah, well. Of course.' She was backing off fast.

'It is solitary work,' he insisted.

'Is that why you have so many wives?' she asked and expected a tirade for her cheek.

Michio nodded and sighed. 'Word gets round. They are the noisiest bunch. Have you met them?'

'Um... Well, sort of...'

'Well, for pity's sake don't tell them where I am.'

'Okay,' she said slowly.

'It's like being pursued by the Furies and the Valkyries all at once.'

Benny smiled. 'But why so many?'

He poured her another cup of tea. 'It gets lonely on tour. Different towns, sometimes different planets every week. My wives didn't all come as one package. It took time. I'm what's called an accumulator.'

Benny could see the attraction. He had mature good looks and authority, gentleness and charm, and also a degree of vulnerability.

He also seemed genuinely unaware of events on the liner.

'Besides, I have other commitments now,' he added and he talked of his appreciative new audience. People who had taken the traditions of his work completely to their hearts. 'I'm all the rage, it seems,' he said with a laugh. 'All that dressing up. They must have been very bored,' he said with a laugh. Just when he thought his career had hit its twilight, they had approached him and given him a whole new impetus. For exclusive performance rights, they had provided this retreat away from the pressures of his old life.

'A place to hide,' Benny said.

'A return to the ancient Floating World before reality ruined everything, perfectly balanced to my specifications. For which I remain deeply honoured. And so do they. Even if they are a little excitable.'

That's putting it mildly, thought Benny. 'And you live on your own?'

'Friends visit, and I have my housekeeper. She keeps me in order.'

'I'm sure she does.' But Benny wasn't sure that his 'friends' were not just in his head. As for his Housekeeper... where was she? There was a streak of white make-up on his neck which intrigued her. 'Who are these people, your "new" audience?' she asked.

'Who knows,' he said. 'I think of them as Kami, divine spirits, good and bad, who dwell on the Takamagahara, the High Plain of Heaven.'

His eyes fixed on her. 'And you? You're not a journalist. I stopped giving interviews years ago. It is most pleasant to meet you, but I'm surprised Iwafuji let you through.'

'I'm looking for someone. A friend of mine. Another actor called Hanekawa Goro.'

‘Goro-san?’ Michio gave the faintest smile. He reached out and took a mulberry.

‘Didn’t he used to act with you? I heard it was like a partnership.’

Michio popped the mulberry into his mouth and pondered for a moment. ‘That was long ago. Poor Goro. I didn’t know he was still alive.’

‘And still performing... after a fashion.’

‘But how was this? Where did you meet him?’

Benny drained the last of her tea. She had been avoiding this moment, but now, like an oncoming tax demand, it had become inescapable. She told Michio Dankizo her story. No point in exaggerating. Actors see through that sort of thing. She told him about the ship, and the havoc caused by the invading shadows, but she left out the stuff about Deluxe apartment 3. He listened intently, giving no reaction, until she mentioned the choir.

‘Did they send you?’ he asked. ‘Who was in charge?’

‘Elsa Gibichung,’ said Benny. ‘But I thought Iwafuji would have told you that.’

He stared at her coldly. ‘Iwafuji? Was she there?’

‘Yes.’

He shook his head. ‘I do not require that of her. She is trusted with my affairs.’

‘Then I’m sorry to break this to you, but Elsa Gibichung is almost certainly dead. One of the shadows struck her with his sword.’

He gave a little gasp. ‘Did Iwafuji know of this?’

‘I told you. She was there.’

He reached for a little silver bell and rang it. A breeze stirred the painted bamboo. Benny looked round, hoping to see the Housekeeper, hoping that her suspicions were all in her own stupid head. But no one came.

‘And Hanekawa Goro? What part had he in this?’ said Michio.

‘He gave me a statue to look after,’ said Benny.

‘Aha,’ smiled her host.

‘I’ll fetch it for you.’ She stood up and hurried back through the rooms until she reached the mock-up of Ivo’s cabin. She picked up the bag and began to retrace her steps.

When she reached the second room, the wall screens were closed.

She tried to pull the bolt, but it was jammed. Stupid. She’d only come through a few seconds before.

A screen rumbled open behind her. Iwafuji was standing against darkness, a look of sickening triumph on her powdered white face.

‘The Admiral’s wayward daughter,’ she whined in that irritating, mannered voice. ‘You sent me a challenge. It insulted my honour.’

‘That’s right,’ said Benny. ‘Do you want to make something of it?’

‘Have I not better things to do?’ The Housekeeper moved forward, but her feet barely touched the matting. Her every movement had unnatural grace. Figures moved around her, shadows against the darkness, carrying and manipulating her. She was a living and willing puppet. ‘You were entrusted with a statue,’ she said. ‘Show it me.’

Benny began to open her bag. ‘It’s not for you, Iwafuji. It was given to me by Hanekawa Goro.’ She faltered, feeling round inside the bag.

There was no statue. She touched something heavy and pulled out an old flat sandal.

Iwafuji’s cold face contorted with anger. She was relishing every second. ‘A fine statue indeed. Is this how you honour such trust?’

They were acting out the play. The Kagamiyama story that Ohatsu had told to Benny. ‘It was here,’ she said. ‘Someone’s taken it.’

Iwafuji assumed a pose of mock horror, one hand to her brow. ‘Is that the twittering of sparrows in the garden? Or the bleating of an idle workgirl, who in her shame has lost far more than she ever was worth.’

‘Dankizo-ya!’ shouted voices from the dark.

‘Bitch,’ said Benny.

Before she could shield herself, Iwafuji hurtled at her and snatched away the sandal. ‘You are dust,’ hissed the Housekeeper. ‘Shamed and dishonoured. Dust fit only to be trampled beneath our shoes.’

She lashed out with the sandal, striking Benny across the cheek.

‘Dankizo-ya!’ cried the voices again. The shadows walked Iwafuji backwards. They reached out her hand to the bowl of real mulberries on the painted table. She crushed one of the fruits in her mouth and a line of red juice trickled like blood down her white chin.

‘Where’s Hanekawa Goro?’ muttered Benny, her hand to her smarting face.

There was no reaction.

‘Where’s Ohatsu? Where’s your eternal enemy? She can’t be dead. You can’t have one without the other!’

Iwafuji’s hand reached slowly into her sleeve. She produced a closed fan and snapped it open. The spread of the fan gleamed silver.

The shadow puppeteers turned Iwafuji’s arm in a high arc.

Benny jumped back as the fan of tempered steel sang across the air inches from her face. Again the weapon slashed and Benny ducked clear, but she had no defence and was being forced into a corner. The fan slashed again and she saw Iwafuji’s eyes beyond it, black and eager for revenge.

She deliberately backed up, feeling the screen wall behind her. It had that slight give as if she was leaning against the wall of a canvas tent. As Iwafuji’s arm rose again, Benny spun herself sideways. The steel fan sliced a fierce gash in the partition where she had been

standing. She grabbed at the matting, pulling it out from under the shadow puppeteers. The creatures were barely solid, yet they went sprawling anyway.

Benny dived through the hole and tumbled across the floor of the garden room. It was deserted. Michio was gone – that was no surprise. She tasted blood in her mouth. Expecting Iwafuji to burst through the torn screen at any moment, she scrambled about looking for the next bolt. It was at the base of the painted bamboo thicket.

The screen slid back and she stepped out into the world.

Spring was behind her. It was late summer here. An orchard rolled lazily away down the hill. The trees were dropping fruit on the matting and the leaves had started turning gold. In the distance, painted on the sky, was the cone of Mount Fuji, crowned with snow.

Benny stood, drinking gulps of the rich air. The place was so ravishingly beautiful that she didn't care if that was all flat illusion.

Below the mountain, a long bridge was daubed across the landscape. A group of miniature figures was moving along it. The bridge was the hanamichi, its far end lost in a blue haze. Benny could make out the painted figures as they approached. A group of women and one tiny, loping figure, described by only a few strokes of the brush. Ivo was leading the choir across.

'How pleasant to contemplate the view,' said a voice.

Benny jumped. Ohatsu was standing next to her. 'It's you! I thought you were... I mean, I thought I'd never see you again.'

'Death is no stranger,' said Ohatsu, bowing low. 'He is the shadow drinking tea in the corner.'

Benny grasped the little old woman's arm. 'We have to get away. Iwafuji's right behind me. What's the quickest way down to the bridge?' She faltered. 'Or are you Hanekawa Goro today?'

'Does it matter?' Ohatsu complained. 'And do stop rushing. I'm not as young as I used to be.'

'Well, stick with me,' insisted Benny. 'I'll get us out.'

'Oh, be quiet, Bernice. If I'm here, Iwafuji will keep well out of sight. Now, do you still have the statue?'

Benny shook her head. 'It's gone. It got stolen somehow. I think Iwafuji set it up.'

Ohatsu didn't seem surprised. 'It's the same old sandal game. She never changes.'

'But the statue... I'm sorry.'

'The world is full of statues. Did Iwafuji strike you?' She took hold of Benny's chin and examined her battered face. 'We must find something for this, or you'll have a bruise as purple as a pigeon's breast by tomorrow.'

'Sorry.'

'No, no. Don't go that way. Look where the road of despair led poor Onoe. That's what Iwafuji wants. It's her dishonour, not yours.'

'Who cares about dishonour?' said Benny. 'I just want to get us out.' She had been eyeing the progress of the figures on the painted bridge, but they had moved behind the trees.

'Hastiness is the brother of shoddiness,' said Ohatsu. She indicated a

little table set for cups and a teapot. 'Come and have some chrysanthemum tea.'

Benny couldn't believe it. 'But the bridge is the way out. Don't you want to leave? Goddess knows what's happening back on the ship.'

'I can go whenever I like, but I still have my part to play.'

'Oh, bloody hell,' said Benny and sat down as realisation shuddered in. 'It's the game, isn't it? You knew Iwafuji would steal the statue when you gave it to me.'

Ohatsu knelt down and poured the tea. 'She always does. The audience expect it. It's something we have to live with.'

Benny ignored the proffered cup. 'I don't want to talk to you, Ohatsu. I want to talk to Hanekawa Goro.'

Ohatsu bowed her head. 'Regrettably, Goro-san is not available.'

'Yes, you are,' snapped Benny. The 'old woman' make-up was intricate, but there was another face underneath. Once you knew that, the pancake and liner wouldn't fool anyone. 'I know you're under there, Hanekawa. You're just stifled by the role that's taken over.' She was getting into her stride now. Back at the academy, presentations had always been her forte. 'So which is the real feud?

The one between Ohatsu and Iwafuji? Or the feud between Hanekawa Goro and Michio Dankizo XXVIII? The two of you can't get away from each other. Even Iwafuji's apartment on the liner was booked under Hanekawa's name! Your real name!' There was no response.

Ohatsu stared at the ground. 'Fine. If you don't want to answer, why don't we ask someone else? How's about Michio Dankizo? Or Iwafuji herself?'

Ohatsu's head jerked up. The old woman stood with surprising ease. Shadows swarmed round Ohatsu, lifting and working her frail limbs like a puppet. Benny went cold. How had she not noticed them before?

'That's their skill,' said Ohatsu, reading Benny's mind. 'In Kabuki, black is the colour of non-existence.' Her body straightened and grew taller. It disappeared altogether as more shadows clustered in like stagehands. It took just a few seconds' frenzied work and then they withdrew again, carrying a stash of wigs and costumes with them.

The transformation was complete. Ohatsu had become Iwafuji.

'Dankizo-ya!' enthused a chorus of disembodied voices.

'Bloody hell. Are you on a rota?' reacted Benny. Her knees went weak and her throat dried. 'No, look, you can't do that. Ohatsu is Hanekawa Goro, not Iwafuji. Michio Dankizo is Iwafuji. Never the twain... I mean, the two twains, they never shall meet. It's not fair. Parallel lines and all that. It isn't fair!'

The housekeeper was still, like a coiled snake about to strike. 'I am

the servant of Michio Dankizo and you came uninvited to disturb his solitude.'

'Did he complain? I was having tea with him before you attacked me.'

Iwafuji was gliding slowly closer. 'You called yourself the servant of Ohatsu.'

'Because I thought you'd killed her. You and all your murderous shadow people...' Benny's words stumbled. 'Oh, my Goddess...' She saw the glint of epiphanic gold angled in the dirt. 'It's all of you, isn't it?' She was digging the idea out with her bare hands, scrabbling out the triumphant hoard faster than was archaeologically proper.

'You're all four of you in one. All run together. Michio Dankizo XXVIII is your stage name, a dynastic honour. I'm right, aren't I? But your real name is Hanekawa Goro. And you played both Ohatsu and Iwafuji on stage so often they just take over. I should be writing this down. It's incredible. Talk about a one-man show.'

'You were uninvited,' said Iwafuji again. 'Dankizo-san has commitments to his public.'

'Well, maybe his public should learn how to behave themselves. They weren't asked to join in either. Audience participation can be bad manners. Especially when people die!'

'Sommerfied-ya!' called voices in the air.

A fury gleamed in Iwafuji's black eyes. 'Dishonoured, like your whole family. All your rabble.'

Want to make me really mad? thought Benny. Works for me.

'Dankizo, Goro, whoever he is today... he abandoned his family. Forty wives. Maybe children too. That's worthy, is it?'

'He chose that family. Let us see you defend the honour of yours.'

A cluster of shadows was framed in the doorway to the garden behind her. They swarmed forward. Benny's arms and legs were held.

She got a mouthful of white make-up as they smeared the paste over her face and draped a loose kimono of white silk around her body.

She struggled, but the hands gripping her limbs began to move her forward. She was a puppet, dragged step by step towards the screen on which the mountainous horizon was painted. Her hand reached down to the bolt, and her fingers folded round the handle. It pulled up and the landscape slid back.

A boundless vault of stars opened before her. She thought she would fall again, but the constellations were painted on the void, like the stars she had crunched against when she fell from the bridge.

'Call that real,' she said. And then she saw the figures approaching.

Two familiar people advancing out of the darkness. These newcomers were not daubed on the screen. They had solid form. A

woman and man moving gracefully, too graceful to be real, and wearing a stylisation of modern dress.

Benny tried to look away, but the shadow hands gripped her head tightly.

Her mother wore the slacks and blouse printed with tiny flowers that Benny recalled her wearing the day that she died. Benny's father was, as she'd expect, in his admiral's full dress uniform, medals and honours in place. He even wore his cap.

Her puppet parents stopped just beyond arm's reach. She could see the shadows that worked them, but black is the colour of non-existence and make-believe can be far stronger than reality. Only the hints of features were painted on their puppet faces, but it was enough. Benny wanted to run and hold them. She pulled against her captors, but they held her tight, forcing her to meet her parents' stare.

What? she thought as their critical scrutiny beat against her. She had long since lost the memory of their voices, so they said nothing.

But they knew everything she'd done and achieved. Dead parents know all your secrets the moment they die. And after that there's no privacy at all. They're always around in your head, criticising and dispensing unwanted advice. So was her life still not good enough?

Her mother glanced at her father. Was she pleading? Begging for mercy? He slowly shook his head in disappointment.

Benny wanted to be angry and lash out, but seeing them both again like this left her helpless. She had nothing to say except, 'Mum and Dad, I'm sorry.'

The Admiral, plainly unimpressed by her genuine contrition, waved his hand in a sharp gesture of disownment. Her mother stared at Benny for a moment and then, hiding her face in her fingerless hands, turned away.

The Admiral pulled a long sword from his belt. He held it across both hands as he offered it to his daughter.

'What're you doing?' Benny said as her arms reached out to take the blade. 'No, Dad. No. No way. I'm not doing that,' she said as her body was bowed in acceptance.

Her father bowed back and turned away.

Benny's hands angled the sword in towards her own chest. 'Stop it. Make them stop. I'm not doing it,' she gasped, staring along the gleaming weapon.

For a second, her head was free. She saw Iwafuji, surrounded by a dozen shadow faces as they leaned in eagerly. 'Shame clutches at your heart with cold hands, dishonoured Onoe. Cut the disgrace from your breast. It is the only honourable path.'

'I'm not Onoe,' yelled Benny. 'And I'm not bloody ashamed of anything!'

Her hands drew out the sword to strike.

There was a commotion behind them. Benny heard a voice, many voices in song. One note became a chord, ringing in the air. The sword faltered and fell away as the old shadows turned to stare at new shadows moving across the landscape screens. Benny fell back unsupported. Her arms and legs stung where they had been gripped.

The largest new shadow set to the screens, dragged them apart with ease. The singing stopped. Mrs Montcalme was framed in the opening. 'Oh, my,' she said as Ivo's fur-ruffed head appeared at her hip.

Benny felt tears welling up at the sight of him, but she forced them back down deep inside. 'Get back!' she yelled, just as Tilani appeared round the screen, leading a cohort of ladies from the Glee Choir.

'He's there,' Tilani shouted, pointing at Iwafuji. The ladies stared at their errant husband in a mix of revulsion and love. Some called out 'Michio'. Others shouted 'Bastard!' in a selection of languages.

Iwafuji scowled and struck a theatrical pose of defiance. In answer, the shadows swarmed in around the Housekeeper. In a moment, the harridan was gone and an old, monstrous figure rose out of the busy maelstrom.

'Dankizo-ya!' cried the spirit voices in the air.

'Michio!' called the ladies.

The white-maned, blue-headed demon, bigger than before, now carried a huge silver club in its clawed hands. It cast back and forth, apparently bewildered by the choice of victims available for disembowelling and spotted Benny lying on the matting.

Mrs Montcalme, programmed to be oblivious to danger and to stand for none of this nonsense, stepped into the ogre's path like a haute couture Sumo. She grappled with the monster, matching it blow for blow, and its strength, even supported by its shadow puppeteers, was barely a match for hers. She was gradually forcing it back, even as its fangs clashed close to her sculpted chins.

Ivo scampered across to Benny and pulled her to a safe corner. 'We have to get out of here,' he urged her. 'The whole liner's off kilter. The rest of the choir are holding the bridge portal open, but the Captain's threatening to put them in a lifeboat at gunpoint.'

There was a scream from the ladies. The mats under Mrs M's feet slid askew and she stumbled to the floor. With a roar like a ton of coal, the demon swung its heavy club down on her head. Mrs Montcalme, a large dent in her manufactured skull, keeled to the floor lifeless.

The monster, barely distracted, resumed its hunt for Benny, hefting its club as it advanced. Benny was trapped in the corner of the screens. As she scrambled for cover, a shadow caught at her ankle, dragging her back into the ogre's path.

The ladies ran at the demon calling, 'Michio!' – but it just laughed and swung its club wide. It reached Benny and stamped one massive foot on her arm to hold her still.

As the ogre raised its club, a little figure leapt up onto its massive arm. Ivo clung tight, hacking at the monster's blue hand with the sword he had found discarded in the corner. The great hand flopped to the floor and the shrieking fiend disappeared under a crowd of shadows.

* * *

Michio Dankizo XXVIII lay slumped on the matting, clutching the stump of his severed hand. It was bound with a shadow bandage. He looked up at the selection of his wives who were standing round him.

They were humming the slow beautiful lament from *The Kamakura Songbook of 2132*. He twitched as if trying to change shape, but the shadows stood back, no longer prepared to help him.

He half laughed in his pain.

'The man with many wives runs fastest and knows the safest place to hide,' he said in Ohatsu's voice.

'The actor with many roles fills the theatre and needs no audience,' replied Iwafuji.

'Listen, you silly old fool,' said Tilani. 'We only wanted to release you.'

'It's true,' called the other wives. 'We all love you, Michio. We just needed you to know that.'

Michio almost choked on his laughter. 'I never wanted to be released. I wanted to escape. I don't want your worlds. I despise the endless round of performances and empty adulation and day-old dinners out of bento boxes. They mean nothing. But I do love my wives. Tell the others. And I didn't want Elsa to die.'

'Or the others,' said Benny loudly.

'Or the others.' He stood unsteadily, still clutching at his arm. 'The little tour is over now. Michio Dankizo XXVIII, last of his dynasty, regrets that he is unable to perform tonight. His dishonour has finally caught up with him. Please tell Iwafuji that I've gone to bed.'

He turned to leave, but a shadow stepped into his path. Other shadows lined the walls in respectful silence. Their leader bowed low to Michio and held out a single white chrysanthemum.

Michio took the bloom and sniffed at it. 'Hardly enough considering the damage done. Our contract is at an end.' He dropped the stem and crushed its head under his sandal. The shadow bowed again and withdrew.

As Michio headed for the house, he saw Benny and stopped. 'You gave a fair performance,' he said, 'even if there was no truth in it. I'd

stick with the dead things if I were you.'

He walked back through the garden and into the house. The screen closed behind him.

'We can't stay,' said Ivo. 'Please, we must get back.'

It was growing dark. Lights twinkled on the painted bridge below, but the ladies refused to leave and Benny understood their reasons.

A price still had to be paid.

The wives of Michio Dankizo XXVIII joined hands and resumed their lament.

Geese ride on the back of the wind.

We light lanterns and float them on the water.

We eat chestnuts with the rice.

You are gone, but we are waiting.

A light glowed through the screen walls of the house. A shadow moved across the surface. It knelt, bowed deeply and lifted a sword to its chest.

Blood spilled down the screen like mulberry juice.

In their darkness, the shadows gave no more applause.

Alone in the silence, Ivo started to yowl.

The *Prince of Mercury* tilted again. Only its bows remained visible and they were sinking fast, sucked upwards into the rent in the spatial fabric.

'Not a black hole,' said Benny. 'More of a shadowy mire.' She sat in the gondola lifeboat as it chugged towards the bulk of the Comma31 transport. Two rows away, the Garner twins, who hardly seemed concerned at the loss of their installation, were in conference, arguing over blueprints for a Mrs Montcalme Mark II. The Choir sat together, quietly pretending that their shock was at losing the ship.

Ivo dabbed Benny's bruised face with antiseptic lint and looked at her reprovingly. 'I know, I know,' she continued. 'If we'd left when you wanted us to, the hole might have closed up and you'd still have a ship to work on.'

'No one else died,' he said. 'That's good.'

'Did I say thank you?' she asked again.

'Five times now.'

She took his arm. The fur was silky soft. 'And what about you?'

Ivo shrugged. 'I'll find a job somewhere. Solarfleet have plenty of other liners. But Benny, there is something you could do for me.'

'Anything.'

'Come with me to the temple.'

'Oh. Ivo, I'm not religious.'

'I know. But I'd like you to see it. To meet my people. To tell our

story.'

"Our" story?'

'Yes. I know it may not seem much, after all your important work, but it means something to me.' His tail twitched nervously as he waited for her decision.

'All right, then,' said Benny sheepishly. She kissed him on his furry forehead and caught again the strong heady scent of musk.

'Ahhh, how sad,' said Dolores, who was sitting behind them. 'And you make such a lovely couple.'

Space gulped down the last of the Prince of Mercury and closed its wounded mouth.

There'll be an inquiry, Benny thought. It could take months, but then who am I? Until I get to the consulate on Old Moses, I don't even exist.

She searched amongst the luggage reclaim for any bags that might have made it off the liner and unearthed virtually all her gear intact, even a receipt key for the Ladygun. The carrier's hold was built for container cargo, not people, but she found a corner to sit and drink her ration of navy soup. For want of something better to do, she fished out her diary. She had plenty to write about.

The trouble was, she seemed to have forgotten most of it already.

The Soul's Prism

Pete Kempshall

Pull yourself together.

You laugh, but the fluid in your mouth makes you gag, chokes off the sound. As fast as you splutter your airway clear, it starts to fill again.

Going into shock.

Mustn't. Mustn't do that.

Pull yourself together.

The human body contains five litres of blood. That's ten pints, old money. Who told you that? Brax? No, not Brax, someone else... Could have been –

Christ, it hurts! Jesus flaming bastard Christ!

Can't call for help – no one knows you're here. Even if they did, there's still that lump of meat in the grass over there...

Don't think about that.

Pull yourself together.

No one's going to find you.

Can you get to the base?

Twenty minutes through the jungle, ten more in the truck.

Can't even walk.

Ten pints. Probably down two already.

You tug at the warm, wet skin around your stomach.

Hold on.

Pull yourself together.

The hover-valet drifted overhead, discreetly spraying the room with vanilla scent. Moaning gently, Jason sank deeper into the senso-chair, which automatically moulded itself to his body and began massaging the base of his neck. Now if the throbbing in his head from the drink and the kicking would just settle down he might even start to enjoy himself.

Yeah, this definitely made his list of The Top Five Cells I've Been Thrown Into.

He cracked his eyes open to see if Benny had come out yet. She'd stormed off into the bedroom the second the guards had locked them in the suite, slamming the door behind her. He hadn't seen her since.

Heard her, yes – the crashing and banging had gone on for a good five minutes, Jason's neuralgia making the sound of each concussion feel like a red-hot needle through the eyeball.

He wondered what time it was. Was it dark yet? If it was dark he could change the windows back and see what was going on outside.

The full-length glass that stretched along the whole front wall of the Balgoris Imperial's penthouse suite provided unparalleled views. The instant Jason had first glimpsed them he had used the polarity controls to turn the windows into floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Bright sunlight and bowel-clenching vertigo – two more things he could do without in his delicate condition. Instead, as he slipped from the chair to peer at the glass, Jason was treated to a stubbly, tired face looking back at him with very, very red eyes. And there was something crusted into his hair. He reached up, and pulled a small piece free. He studied it then popped it into his mouth.

Cheesecake.

The fight had lasted all of, oh, a minute. Benny's famous right hook had laid the Admiral flat on his back. Before the old guy had even hit the ground, the knuckle-draggers running security were closing in on her. Shoving her to one side – had her heel snapped? Can't remember – and bellowing that he'd take care of this, Jason interposed himself between the gorillas and his ex-wife. Glass in one hand, beckoning to them with the other, he had exhorted them to come and have a go if they thought they were hard enough.

They did and they were.

Of course, there'd been uproar. The monkeys were outraged at the disrespect shown by someone starting a punch-up at their funeral, the Nivisi were terrified that the children they had brought along were going to grow up in wartime and the Hovans were confused and a little angered to find a slightly drunk, very concussed Jason face-down

in their desserts.

Then, cuffed up, and, in his own case, roughed up enough to ensure he wouldn't mouth off any more, Jason and Benny had been frogmarched out of the wake.

Jammed into a lift, they had been zoomed sixty-eight floors straight up to the hotel penthouse. Not their room, something a whole lot more posh. The sort of thing that only got booked out by couples claiming to be called Smith, or employees weekending on company expenses. Or both. Benny had seethed the whole way up – Jason had required assistance from two of the Admiral's bruisers just to remain upright. At last they were uncuffed and deposited in the hotel's presidential suite, their guards taking station outside as the door hissed closed.

That had been hours ago, and even though Jason's head was marginally clearer now, his ex-wife still hadn't given him any idea why she had punched out a Spacefleet officer in front of dozens of mourners.

She was probably just waiting for a prompt.

It was funny how Jason had no problem at all flinging himself between his ex and a posse of highly trained killing machines, yet still couldn't bring himself to ask Benny what the hell she'd been playing at. Minutes crawled by as he stood outside the bedroom, mustering the courage to go in. Finally, his head swimming from the booze and the beating, he slumped against the door handle and suddenly found himself stumbling inside.

'Hi. You okay?'

It was dark. Benny was propped up on the bed, sheets twisted around her like a cocoon. The largest vidscreen Jason had seen outside the bridge of a warship stood in one corner, flickering silently while Benny stared at it, using a tiny remote to spin through the channels at epilepsy-inducing speed.

'So,' Jason began, aiming for bright-and-breezy but hitting closer to forced-and-intrusive. 'What was all that about?'

The vid channels strobed faster.

'Can I get a clue?'

And faster.

'Buy a vowel?'

And faster.

'Phone a friend?'

An object zipped past his ear, shattering on the wall and showering him with glass and something glutinous. It smelled like Benny's posh face-cream. Jason beat a hasty retreat, ducking a flying high-heeled shoe (broken – he was right!). No, that couldn't have been Benny's posh face-cream. She'd have to be more upset than he'd ever seen her

to throw that at him. Besides, the bottle would still be in their luggage downstairs. A book whizzed through the gap in the door as he yanked it closed behind him.

Leaning against the lintel and panting, Jason's eye settled on the cover of the book-cum-missile that had slammed into the hover-valet and dropped, along with the sparking droid, to the carpet. It was a copy of *The Gwenan Enigma*. He picked it up and riffled through it. The corner of page 354 was folded down to mark the reader's place. His place.

It was his book. In someone else's room.

Right. No one had been in the suite since he and Benny had been locked in. So no one could have dropped off their luggage after they were arrested. So the luggage was already here when they arrived. So someone intended for them to end up in this room, regardless of any scrapping that may have occurred in the function room.

What the hell was going on here?

The main door to the suite hissed open and Jason was greeted by the sight of the Admiral, flanked by two of the no-necks who'd given Jason his seeing-to.

'Everything all right in here?' the Admiral asked. 'My men heard things breaking. Again.'

Jason slumped back into his senso-chair and let it work its magic.

He could have used a couple of Nocohol tabs to flush his system out, kill the hangover once and for all, but the hover doodad had drawn a blank finding the suite's supply. 'Fine. Yeah, lovely, thanks.'

'Good. Then we should have a talk, I think.' Hair swept back, still in his dress uniform and with his hands clasped behind his back, the Admiral would have been immaculate if not for the bruising around his left cheek. Jason wondered why he hadn't had it treated – quick heal-patch, Bob's your uncle. Jason had used one himself not a couple of hours ago. It crossed his mind that this was the type of man who'd wear injuries as a badge of honour. He fitted the profile, all hard angles and good posture, that peculiarly military stance Jason linked to spending years with a pole shoved up your –

'Aras, Reynolds: wait out there. I don't expect these two to give me any trouble.' The click of an opening door from the far end of the room drew a glance from the Admiral. 'You're not going to give me any trouble, are you, Bernice?'

Benny stepped out into the suite's lounge. 'Not unless you've got a sword you want to lend me.'

The Admiral smiled thinly, patting the pockets of his razor-creased dress-uniform pants. 'Sorry. Left it in my other uniform. You're looking well.'

'You're looking old.'

‘Pressures of command. Making the big decisions takes it out of you.’

Benny snorted. ‘And you didn’t get where you are today by shying away from the big decisions.’

‘Excuse me! Third party in the room!’ Jason waggled his fingers at Benny and the Admiral. ‘Any danger of an explanation? Come to think of it, an introduction wouldn’t hurt.’

‘Of course.’ The Admiral drew himself up to his full height, shifting back into military mode. That pole seems to be holding, then, Jason mused. ‘I am Admiral Simon Kyle. Spacefleet has placed me in charge of the investigation into the murder of Ivo FitzIndri.’

‘What?’ said Benny.

‘Ivo was killed at our training camp at Jarghk. That means the investigation falls under our jurisdiction.’

Benny shook her head. ‘No, you said “murder”. Ivo was murdered?’

Kyle folded his hands behind his back. ‘We believe so, yes.’

Benny slumped into the senso-chair next to Jason. The neck-massagers thrummed into action – she shrugged them off.

‘And what, you want to ask us some questions or something?’

Jason chipped in.

‘I want you to help me catch his killer.’

Jason laughed. That’s why all of our luggage was already moved here, he thought. They were probably going to bring us straight up here after the wake.

‘Is something amusing you, Mr Kane?’

‘Sorry, mate, but you’ve come to the wrong people. We really didn’t know this Ivo. Benny met him once, what, 50 years ago. For a couple of days, tops. What we know about him you could write on a –’

‘Your participation has been specifically requested by Ivo’s people,’

Kyle explained. ‘The demi-lemurs have assigned their own representative to assist in the investigation. She believes you can provide something relevant to the process.’

‘Yeah, but you see, we’re –’

Benny rose to her feet, a hard expression on her face. ‘When do we leave?’

‘First light. I have a shuttle docked on the roof.’

‘Then I suggest you go now, Admiral. We’re going to need sleep.’

Kyle shuffled uncomfortably. ‘As you wish. First light, then.’

Jason watched the suite door swish shut behind Kyle, then turned to Benny. ‘Want to explain that?’

Benny strode back towards the bedroom.

‘I thought we were here for rescue archaeology,’ Jason called after her. ‘Pop in, catalogue a dig, kick-start the local economy, head home for papers and plaudits.’

The door slammed behind her.
All right, he thought. CSI: Balgoris it is.

The shuttle floated upwards, easing gently through the cloudline then levelling off at cruising altitude. She'd never admit it, but Benny was grudgingly impressed by Simon's piloting skills. Dave Vyshinsky's high-G landing yesterday had convinced her nothing had changed about military flyboys in the years since she'd last flown Spacefleet.

But having braced herself for another bone-crushing lift-off, she'd been surprised firstly that Kyle was doing his own flying and secondly at his calm assurance. It was the technique of a pilot who loved the way a ship handled more than he loved putting his passengers through the wringer – a rarity in the armed forces.

If he'd treated Benny as well as he treated the shuttle, she thought, she wouldn't be feeling the urge to wander up to the cabin and thump his eject button.

Benny gazed out of the window. Hundreds of feet below, the shadow of the shuttlecraft rushed along, projected onto the tops of the clouds by the fierce sunlight. Plush as the shuttle might be compared to regular dropships, the interior modifications didn't extend to seats with individual vidscreens and pockets full of in-flight magazines. So, it was look at the view or look at the passengers.

And Benny really didn't fancy looking at the passengers.

Stepping out onto the launch pad on the roof of the Balgoris Imperial, Benny had been dismayed to see that the demi-lemur representative Kyle had mentioned the night before was the same woman who'd cut her dead in the lift. She was obviously from a slightly different branch of the lemurs to Ivo – while Ivo had been dark, framed with his distinctive snowy ruff, Vala's facial features were white, topped with grey fur that appeared to run from her forehead right down her back. The fox-like sharpness of her muzzle, however, was offset by the same brown, wet, puppy-dog eyes Benny had found so attractive in Ivo all those years ago.

The woman was already decked out in a set of Spacefleet fatigues that concealed what remained of her prosimian features, including her tail if she had one. Benny couldn't tell one way or the other as she watched the lemur loading a pair of grey packs into a storage compartment under the hull. Biting the bullet, Benny strode up, hand extended.

'Hello again! Bernice Summerfield.' She forced a smile on to her face. 'Again.'

The demi-lemur extended a small, delicate paw, drawing close enough for Benny to smell the familiar musk that had permeated Ivo's old room on the *Prince of Mercury*. 'Vala.'

And that quick, softly muttered introduction had been it as far as the getting-to-know-you was concerned. Vala had disappeared up the shuttle's ramp and, by the time Benny had stowed her own bags, was strapped into her seat, eyes closed in either sleep or meditation.

Fifteen minutes into the flight and the demi-lemur was still off in her own little space.

Benny glanced over at her pale, sweating ex. Jason was keeping his distance, too, strapped tight into a seat halfway down the passenger cabin, face tinged with green. Normally she would have discontinued the silent treatment by this point – by Summerfield/Kane standards this latest fight was trivial, simply not worth the continued effort to maintain it. And she had thought to bring Nocohol tablets with her, after all. But if she extended the olive branch now Jason would only start asking about her and Simon and she just wasn't ready to get into that. On the other hand, if she was going to be lumbered with the Admiral for as long as it took to find Ivo's killer, she should probably try to get Jason onside. Any ally would be useful.

She dipped her fingers into a pocket and withdrew the small phial of yellow pills she'd secreted away. The ship lurched suddenly, bouncing through a pocket of turbulence, and Jason retched loudly, hands flying to his mouth. Benny slipped the tablets back into hiding.

Well, maybe just a little longer...

Dave Vyshinsky had been right. Jarghk Station was without a doubt the least impressive military installation Benny had seen in a long time. While Simon drifted the shuttle in to land, Benny peered down at the large, cleared area of jungle.

Only two buildings had actually made it past the pre-fab stage. One long, low affair was, she supposed, the motor pool, judging from the intersecting parabolas of tyre tracks around it. The other, squat-looking construction had to be command and control. The huge satellite dish and antenna array gave that one away.

Aside from those plascrete facilities, however, the rest of the base appeared to have been put up in five minutes flat. Dormitory blocks, store rooms, medical facilities, all fashioned from a thin metal that made them light enough to be flown in with lifters, dumped on site and used within minutes. Eventually the metal walls would be strengthened with plascrete shells – Benny could see the mixer standing idle to the north of the base – and transformed into permanent structures. Right now the whole set-up looked like it might blow away in a strong wind.

And a strong wind was just what the troops on the ground were forced to deal with, the shuttle's thrusters blasting up dirt and grit from the unsealed landing area in a miniature sandstorm. Simon

guided the shuttle daintily to the ground. The debris cloud settled as the engines sighed into power-down, allowing the soldiers to approach.

The landing ramp whined open and Jason was off down the metal walkway as soon as it was physically possible to squeeze through the gap. He took the descent at a run: watching from the window, Benny genuinely thought he was going to fall to the ground and hug it. After an unsteady wobble at the foot of the ramp, however, Jason drew himself upright and assumed the surprisingly convincing air of a man who was not, under any circumstances, about to spew violently all over Spacefleet's lovely welcoming committee.

Unbuckling her harness, Benny followed after him. The ground crew bustled, jockeying for position in the race to unload the bags and equipment. At least travelling with an Admiral meant no waiting at luggage carousels.

'No, please. Call me Jason.'

Benny felt the muscles in her neck and shoulders tighten. She knew the sound of her husband in Suave Mode – the slight deepening of the voice, the thickly laid on charm, the cut-glass pronunciation. A small gap in the clustering troops allowed Benny to slip away from the shuttle and see exactly what was going on.

Jason was standing altogether too close to a lithe, leggy soldier who easily topped six feet in her combat boots. Her hair was a cascade of auburn that terminated just above her shoulders and Benny didn't need x-ray vision to know that the way the soldier's jumpsuit was clinging to her would be creating a corresponding jump in Jason's suit. Round about halfway down, where it would affect his gait.

Jason turned up the wattage on his grin and Benny was disconcerted to find the Amazon returning it with equal brightness. It was when Jason took the woman's hand and looked like he was raising it to his lips that Benny's trance finally broke and she hustled towards them.

'Morning!' she breezed, shattering the moment. 'I see you've met my husband!' Closer up, she could see that the woman was an officer, her ever-so-slightly-too-tight outfit had captain's pips at the neck.

'Good morning, Professor Summerfield.' Benny was taken aback by the warmth of the greeting and the strength of the strong, brief handclasp offered to her. 'Captain Caroline Dadd. Thank you so much for accepting my invitation to examine our dig site. It really is an honour.'

'Erm, actually we're here –'

'Of course, Admiral Kyle has already explained everything.' She half-turned away, snapping into a sharp salute. 'Admiral Kyle, sir.'

'Captain.' Kyle's manner was stiff – far beyond the usual military

formality, Benny sensed. 'I am assuming command of this facility as of,' he glanced at his chronometer, '0827 hours exactly.'

'Command transfer acknowledged, Admiral.'

'This is Vala Prejaq, the designated representative of Ivo's people.'

Kyle gestured to the small demi-lemur lurking inconspicuously behind him. She shuffled quietly forward.

'When may we see the murder scene, Captain?' she squeaked.

Dadd smiled. 'Straight to business, eh? Let me show you all to your quarters and when you're settled I'll make arrangements to drive you out there.'

'That won't be necessary, Captain,' Kyle interjected. 'I shall see to the arrangements myself.'

'Yes, sir.' She eyed Kyle stonily, but Benny barely had time to blink before Dadd's face had switched back to its previous animated good humour. 'Shall we be off then, everyone?'

Jason sauntered alongside the athletic officer, hands thrust jauntily into his pockets. 'So Caroline, tell me,' he said. 'How did a nice girl like you end up in Spacefleet?' Benny groaned to herself. Does he actually know he's doing it, she asked herself, or is it just a default setting for him? All these years and she still never quite knew. Never mind. This was likely to be the last dealing she – or Jason – would have with the altogether too attractive Captain Dadd for a while. With Simon in command of the investigation and now the entire base, she'd be well and truly on the bench.

'Tell me, Admiral,' Vala chattered as they walked. 'Am I correct in my understanding that Captain Dadd was the last person to see Ivo alive?'

'Indeed,' Kyle responded. 'She'll be working closely with us on the investigation. You'll be seeing a lot of her.'

This time Benny's groan wasn't inward.

'And this is you, Professor.' Benny was pleasantly surprised to find that their accommodation block was considerably less barbaric than she'd envisaged. The room to which Captain Dadd had opened the door was small but comfortable-looking, with a bed, computer station and built-in wardrobe. There were also the tell-tale lines in the wall that designated the presence of a fold-out ablution unit – it was a long way from basins and bidets, but it was better than the communal facilities Benny felt sure the regular troops stationed on the base would have to endure.

'Thanks, Caroline,' Jason smarmed. 'Looks lovely.'

Benny's arm shot up, barring his passage. 'Actually, darling, I think this room's just for me. I'm sure Captain Dadd here can help you with alternative sleeping arrangements.'

Swooshing the door closed in Jason's incredulous face, Benny made straight for the window and heaved it open. The green wall of the jungle was no more than a few feet away from the pre-fab block, a further sign that the base was in construction limbo. Any military facility worth the name would have cleared away all possible cover for hundreds of metres around its buildings.

Benny rooted around in her pockets until she located the vial of Nocohol, and lobbed the yellow pills as hard as she could into the undergrowth.

‘Don’t you have minions for this sort of thing?’

Jason shrugged his shoulders to redistribute the weight of his pack. No matter how he shifted it, the straps still cut into his skin like cheese-wire. Benny rolled her eyes: he’d only been carrying the thing two minutes.

Irritating as it was, Jason’s whinging had raised a valid point in Benny’s mind. It had already taken ten minutes of gluteus-tenderising travel in an armoured all-terrain vehicle just to reach the track. (Well, Simon had called it a track, in reality it was a barely discernible break in the jungle to the left of the dirt road.) The last thing anyone needed after such a bumpy ride was a forced march through dense vegetation, heaving bundles of weighty equipment. As an admiral, Simon had the power to summon hordes of eager squaddies to do his bidding at a moment’s notice and, with heavy packs and several large crates to heft, a party of porters not only made good sense, it was bloody essential. So why hadn’t he rustled up the minions? The only people he’d sanctioned to make the trip out to the murder site with him were Captain Dadd, Benny, Jason and Vala.

Ducking under a low-slung vine, Benny felt a crawling dread creep down her neck. At least she hoped it was dread – she’d seen some pretty vile many-legged things clamber across her feet already on this hike, and the thought of one wriggling into her shirt brought on a shudder of revulsion. No, this was a very different feeling, of a realisation you’d rather not have. The reason Simon had kept the numbers down was disturbing, but obvious.

He didn’t trust anyone else.

The overhanging foliage thickened as the party struck out into the jungle and Benny found that the canopy of branches diluted the light enough for her to dispense with her ray-bans for the first time in days. The ground underfoot changed too. Protected from the glare of the Balgoris star, it was loamy and damp-smelling, bordering on marshy. She could feel the soil sucking gently at her combat boots, and was thankful that Captain Dadd had ordered suitable footwear and clothing for her, Jason and Vala. None of the trio had expected to go bush-bashing when they’d arrived on Balgoris, and if it hadn’t been for the generously supplied fatigues and boots Benny could well have been making this trip in a little black dress.

Insects whirred and hummed around her head. Benny swatted at the more daring bloodsuckers and noticed how the others in her group were untouched by the assault. Vala she could understand – the demi-lemurs would be genetically attuned to conditions like these, would be

unlikely to attract the local mossies. But the others?

She remembered the faint chemical smell she'd detected on Jason in the cab of the ATV, and kicked herself. Simon and Captain Dadd had been living at Jarghk long enough to know where to get insect repellent. One of them had obviously passed on this nugget of wisdom to Jason (no prizes for guessing who) but, of course, no one had thought to mention it to her. Lessons for archaeologists number six: never forget the importance of local knowledge. Slapping at her neck, Benny swore quietly and ploughed on through the green.

Moments later, she sank to her ankle in the soft dirt, the change in footing almost unbalancing her. She yanked her boot free with a squelch. What the hell had Ivo been doing all the way out here? At the briefing they had all attended before leaving, Dadd had revealed that Ivo asked permission to go into the jungle to meditate. Some weeks earlier, the base's construction survey team had discovered the closest thing the area had to a beauty spot, with a quite astonishing view. Dadd was keen to see it herself and, since Simon had assigned her personally to keep an eye on Ivo, she offered to show him the way. She had left him to his thoughts for a moment, heard cries and returned to find the lemur had fallen from the cliff.

'How do you know it wasn't an accident?' Jason had chipped in.

'We have evidence that it wasn't,' Simon had replied bluntly.

'And can we see it?'

Simon had treated Jason to a look that no doubt emasculated the men under his command – Jason had grinned at him cockily. 'Once we reach the crime scene, Mr Kane.'

And so here they were. There was no doubt Simon knew more about the murder than he was letting on, but Benny was irritated to find that it was Caroline Dadd who was at the forefront of her mind.

It was more than just her flirting with Jason, although that was going to have to stop. Dadd was so obvious that even Simon had noticed, and his disapproval was plain, to say the least. Perhaps it was her breezy disregard for the discipline and formality on which Simon seemed to thrive. Funny, the Simon Kyle she'd known at the academy had had such a brilliant sense of humour...

Stick to the point, Benny. Dadd just didn't fit the Spacefleet profile.

Which raised the question, how did she get to be a captain? Benny shook her head and plodded on. Finding Ivo's killer was going to be a nightmare – there were just too many unknown quantities. What Benny did know was that Ivo left Jarghk Station alone with Caroline Dadd, and an hour later he was dead. Benny was going to watch the captain very carefully indeed.

They'd been walking for maybe quarter of an hour. Benny's mind

wandered from the identity of the killer to more immediate concerns.

The handles of the equipment case she was carrying chafed the skin from her palms. She was about ready to plonk the box down and sit on it, regardless of whatever mad military schedule Simon had decided to adhere to. Yep, a nice sit down, and if she could get her boots off, maybe she'd give her feet a little massage...

Wrapped up in her daydream, Benny didn't notice that the thick jungle was becoming more sparse until she realised she had emerged from the treeline. Immediately the weight of her baggage was forgotten and she got her first look at the place where Ivo died.

'Well, I can see why he wanted to come all the way out here,' Jason breathed.

The opening from the jungle funnelled outward into a wide, grassy space, speckled with wild flowers. A scattering of mossy boulders had Benny hypothesising that the clearing was the result of a meteor strike years before.

But the most striking part of the scenery was the cliff. Two hundred metres from the point where Benny had stepped out of the jungle the meadow terminated abruptly in a dizzying drop. Beyond the precipice Benny could see a vast panorama of green, a carpet of trees stretching far over the discernible horizon.

'It's incredible,' she whispered.

'Five minute rest, people,' Simon announced, breaking the spell.

'Then we'll set up and see what we have to see.' Gently lowering his pack to the ground, he spun around at the faint tinkle of breaking glass. He glowered hotly at Jason, who had carelessly dumped his pack on the ground.

'Take it out of my pay,' Jason muttered and collapsed to the grass.

Eyes shut and arms spread wide to absorb the sunshine, he looked like he was trying to recoup his lost energy by photosynthesis.

Simon and Captain Dadd began to unpack the technological doodads they'd sweated through the undergrowth while Vala wandered off towards the cliff edge. Not feeling much like spending time with the soldiers or Jason, Benny dismissed a sudden surge of vertiginous concern and decided to follow the demi-lemur. Vala hadn't uttered a single word to Benny since introducing herself at the shuttle and the small woman's stand-offishness weighed heavily on Benny's mind. So many people at the funeral had given her reason to worry about past slights or insults she may have unknowingly perpetrated, and it was pressure she could do without. If she was going to work with Vala to find Ivo's murderer, she'd have to get whatever was bothering the lemur out into the open.

By the time Benny caught up with her, Vala was staring off the rock face at the forest floor far below. Shuffling as close as she dared to the

edge – and then, after her steps sent a cascade of dirt and pebbles trickling into space, shuffling swiftly back again – Benny sidled up next to her and peered into the ravine. The drop was a sheer couple of hundred metres straight down into a stone-strewn margin that separated the cliff wall from the continuation of the jungle. Ivo would have had plenty of time on the way down to realise what was coming...

‘Captain Dadd only left him here for a few minutes.’ Benny started at the lemur’s small voice – she’d been expecting to have to make the first move. She turned and looked into the demi-lemur’s deep, round eyes, each one a large sinkhole of sadness. There was vulnerability there, a timidity that replaced the hard disdain Benny had seen previously. Whatever Benny had done to offend Vala was buried under the sheer weight of emotion at standing in the place where Ivo died. ‘She says she couldn’t have been out of sight of Ivo for more than ten seconds after she heard him scream.’

Benny drew back further from the edge. ‘How did he get away so quickly?’

‘The killer?’

Benny turned back towards the trees. She noticed that off in the distance, Simon had moved to the other side of the clearing to set up his equipment.

Jason, meanwhile, had stirred from his lassitude and was helping Captain Dadd drive tall metal stakes into the earth, each one topped with some kind of recording device.

‘Right,’ she said, indicating to Vala the wide-open space between the jungle and the precipice. ‘Assuming someone pushed Ivo over the edge, he wouldn’t have had time to get to cover without Dadd seeing him. So how did he get away?’

Vala raised a paw to her face, nuzzling her chin with it. ‘A matter transporter perhaps?’

‘Could be,’ Benny conceded. Her eyes flicked to the chasm. ‘Unless he jumped. Fastest way out of sight would be to go over after Ivo. And no one would think to look down there for the killer.’

‘There is another explanation,’ Vala chirped. ‘Captain Dadd is lying.’

Bernice looked over at Jason and Caroline, laughing and invading each other’s personal space as they fought to set up another recording instrument. ‘Much as I’d love it if you were right, I don’t think so. Something’s up with her, but she’s still the only person from the base Simon trusted to come with us out here. He must know she can’t be involved or he’d have found a way to freeze her out.’

‘Perhaps he can tell us himself,’ Vala suggested.

Simon was stalking across the meadow towards them, two of the metal poles under each arm. ‘Help me with these, please, Professor.’

‘Your arms packed up, have they?’ Benny snapped, snatching one of the devices from him driving it sharply into the dirt.

Vala stepped forward quickly. ‘What exactly do these do, Admiral?’

‘My men made a forensic sweep of this area as soon as Ivo’s body was recovered from the base of the cliff.’ Kyle held a hand up, signalling a break in his train of thought. ‘No, Professor, turn the projector in towards the clearing.’

Benny stared up at him from under her brows.

Simon turned back to Vala. ‘The readings from the sweep were fed into holographic analysis units which extrapolated the events leading up to Ivo’s death, based on footprints, damage to the surrounding area and other trace factors.’

‘Fascinating,’ Benny huffed as she dusted her hands off on her trousers.

‘The analysis units have recreated Ivo’s murder and these projectors will overlay a full-sized holographic version over this clearing. We will be able to see a real-time re-enactment of the killing, played out at the scene of the crime itself.’

‘Right you are.’ Benny was impressed really, but she wasn’t about to tell Simon that. ‘Shall we get on with it, then?’

‘Indeed,’ Kyle said. Jason and Caroline Dadd were strolling across the field towards them – Benny spotted that Jason’s devil-may-care layabout expression had given way to one of quiet concern. As soon as they reached the rest of the group, Kyle aimed a control device at the nearest projector and thumbed the play button.

The group turned as one towards the cliff edge, where a blocky, holographic figure had fizzed into being. While the crude animatic lacked features, Benny could tell from its size and attitude that it represented Ivo. The avatar sat, legs drawn up to its chin, facing the chasm, and Benny could imagine the lemur staring into the distance, absorbed by his own thoughts.

A humanoid shape flickered to life to the party’s left, strolling towards the Ivo standin. ‘Whoever it was,’ Kyle posited, ‘Ivo either knew him or didn’t hear him coming.’ That’s why Simon doesn’t trust anyone at the base, Benny surmised. If the killer was someone Ivo knew, they’d probably have come from Jarghk Station. That didn’t explain why he’d ruled Dadd out, though.

The alter-Ivo rose jerkily to its feet and faced the representation of what must surely be his killer. The two images retained their positions for a minute or so, unmoving.

‘What are they doing?’ Vala asked.

‘They’re talking,’ muttered Jason.

Suddenly the holo-lemur leapt at the other figure, fingers extended towards its face. The humanoid grasped Alter-Ivo’s wrists; Alter-Ivo

whipped up his legs and kicked into his opponent's chest. The killer's image staggered backwards, retaining its grip before swinging the animated primate down, driving it hard into the ground. Even with the crudity of the holographic representations, the viewers could see that Ivo's spine had been splintered by the impact. If he hadn't ended up going over the cliff, Ivo would have been crippled for life.

The flickering figures remained as they were for a moment, one lying motionless, the other standing over it. A cold feeling uncoiled in Benny's stomach as she realised what was happening. He's gloating, she thought. He shattered Ivo's back and then took time out to crow about it.

Then Ivo's assailant bent at the waist and picked up his broken opponent. Benny saw Vala look away, frightened. The fight had taken the pair of holo-combatants twenty metres back from the edge of the cliff, and Benny sympathised with Vala's decision not to watch what would surely follow: the killer coldly carrying the lemur to the precipice and dropping him off. But Benny was an investigator; and she owed it to her friend.

The strobing image of the killer lifted the holo-lemur above its head, arms fully extended. The chill in Benny's gut seeped up into her chest as the killer flexed its arms and effortlessly flung the body towards the clifftop. The twisted figure sailed through the air in a parabola that not only covered the twenty metres to the edge but also a further ten metres beyond it. Kyle froze the programme as the body dropped out of sight, its viewers similarly frozen by what they'd just seen. Seconds crawled by before the silence was broken, and Jason gave voice to what everyone was thinking.

‘What the bloody hell was that?’

The trek back to the ATV took place in silence, to a point where Benny actually began to miss Jason's whinging. Kyle and Caroline Dadd had obviously known what they would see during the re-enactment, so weren't quite so shocked. Vala, however, was plainly stunned – utterly unable to process the details. The poor woman was still shaking now. It was difficult to tell from the brooding expression on Jason's face what was going on inside his head. Only his lack of banter betrayed any deep concern.

It was obvious now why Simon had discounted Caroline Dadd from the list of suspects. There was no way in the galaxy that the skinny cow could have thrown Ivo as far as the killer had, not without serious bionic enhancement. Benny could see no evidence of that on Dadd's trim physique. She should probably ask Jason to double check – he was sure to have looked more closely than Benny had. Then again, knowing her ex-husband's current stand on cybernetic adaptation, if he had spotted anything of that kind on the captain he probably wouldn't be flirting with her quite so keenly.

So what about someone else at Jarghk Station? The killer had probably been someone Ivo knew – the holo-lemur had shown no sign of concern as his killer had approached. They'd even chatted.

Benny would have to check to see if any of the soldiers on base had received robotic prosthetics – many veterans preferred them to straightforward cloned replacements, a kind of macho badge of honour. The senior members of the skeleton staff on base would all be reasonably experienced, if they were expected to train new recruits, so it wasn't beyond belief that one of them had been upgraded. Surely Simon would have checked into that as soon as he'd seen the holo-programme for the first time, though. So assuming none of the military personnel fell into that category, who did that leave?

The ATV was waiting where they'd left it on the dirt track, and the silence continued as the group piled aboard. Captain Dadd wriggled her tightly packed rear into the driving seat – Benny was astounded to see that Jason barely noticed – and roared the vehicle around in a three-point turn to face back to Jarghk.

The vehicle bounced along the track, its powerful engine drowning out most of the other sounds in the cabin, so it was immediately odd to Benny that Jason picked the noisiest time possible to stagger down the aisle and talk to her. Like he didn't want anyone else to hear.

'I get it now.'

'Get what?' Benny sighed.

'Why you punched the Admiral.'

Benny was less than thrilled with the way this was headed.

‘Enlighten me.’

‘I know about what he did to you back at the Academy. Back at the clearing, while we were setting up, Caroline filled me in.’

Better that than the other way around, Benny conceded inwardly.

She was pleased to see the expression on Jason’s face was as close to sincere concern as he got.

‘I just wanted you to know that I’m here if you want to talk about it,’ he continued, before heading back to his seat. He’s trying to build bridges, Benny realised, suddenly awash with guilt that she hadn’t got around to calling a truce with him before now. Bless him, she thought as he staggered down the aisle, he’s really worried about me.

Then dropping into his seat and swinging his muddy feet up, Jason whipped out *The Gwenan Enigma* and was lost to the world.

Yup. Worried to death.

The ATV rumbled back into the Jarghk compound, swinging round onto the plascrete forecourt of the vehicle garage before belching to a standstill.

Benny disembarked quickly – her eyes felt like they’d fall out completely if she had to endure another second of the vehicle’s constant bumping and shaking. Which reminds me, she thought, reaching down for the dark glasses dangling on the lanyard round her neck. No point keeping them in their sockets if she was going to burn them out the moment she got beyond tinted windows.

Captain Dadd jumped clear of the cab, and sashayed towards the vehicle pool to sign the transporter back in. Jason leapt out behind her, stumbled, stuffed his paperback into his pocket and followed the captain like a little lost puppy. Benny realised she was grinding her teeth. Just when she was ready to make it all up with him... She really had married the most clueless git in the galaxy. She slung on her pack and stomped off to the accommodation block, staring, incandescent, at the ground.

‘Ah, Professor. There’s someone here I’d like you to meet.’

Benny’s head whipped up, and she scowled at Simon. His hail had not been directed at her, however: instead, the Admiral was beckoning to a figure strolling to meet them from one of the metal portacabins.

Benny didn’t recognise the woman’s species. She was a shade taller than Benny, with long, bright orange hair tied back from a face the yellow of a week-old bruise. A small waist expanded out to broad shoulders that tested the stitching of the woman’s clothes, themselves a sight to behold. Someone – presumably this new arrival – had adapted standard Spacefleet coveralls by sewing on as many pockets and zippered enclosures as the material could comfortably hold, then

sewing on some more. The various storage areas bulged and swelled on the fabric, stuffed with who knew what clutter and giving the alien the look of an excessively tubered potato.

‘This,’ declared Simon, ‘is Professor Bernice Summerfield, from the Braxiatel Collection. Professor Summerfield, meet our on-site archaeologist, Professor Raycl Rugrien.’

Rugrien flashed out a hand, clasping Benny’s tightly and wagging it. While the skin on the backs of her hands seemed smooth, Rugrien’s palm was sandpaper-rough, causing Benny to wince perceptibly from the grip. The bizarre academic seemed not to notice and, oblivious to Benny’s discomfort, continued to pump away at her hand. All the while, Rugrien’s eyes never left Benny’s face. Their milky, cataract-like colouring meant Benny couldn’t tell if it was hero-worship or narcissistic joy at catching her own reflection in Benny’s dark glasses.

‘This is an honour, Professor Summerfield, an overwhelming honour,’ purred Rugrien. Hero-worship, then. ‘I have so wanted to meet you, ever since I read your papers on Martian archaeology. Such insight, I was quite taken aback!’

‘Erm, actually I co-wrote those with a colleague, Dr Ovmakh, so it’d be unfair –’

‘Nonsense!’ Rugrien giggled. ‘It is obvious to anyone with any archaeological talent that the true genius was yours. Now, you must come with me to the tomb, I am most impatient to hear your thoughts about it.’

‘And I’ll be happy to share them a little later, Professor, but I’ve got some things to discuss with Admiral Kyle just at the moment.’ After what she’d seen back in the clearing, she’d be buggered if she was going to let herself be shanghaied into a site examination by her biggest fan. ‘You know, red tape, that sort of thing.’

‘Professor Rugrien has been fully informed as to your reasons for being here. Fully informed,’ Kyle stressed. ‘She spent a lot of time with Ivo. I thought you might like to confer on that topic as well.’

Fabulous, Benny thought, another chef to help stuff up the broth.

‘Absolutely!’ she breezed. Smiling as broadly as she could manage, Benny tried to move away only to feel a tugging on her arm. Rugrien was still holding on to her right hand, scratchy fingers working at it in something uncomfortably close to a caress. Suddenly deeply uneasy, Benny reached across with her left and started to pry away the enthusiastic digger’s grip. ‘Later, then?’

‘Yes, yes, of course, Professor Summerfield,’ Rugrien enthused.

‘Later, whenever you’re ready, just let me know. I’ll make myself available. I am billeted in the same dormitory block as you, so I shall be exceedingly easy to find. See you later, Professor!’

This last was addressed to Benny’s rapidly receding back – she was

already hustling to catch up to Vala, Jason and Dadd, wagglng her fingers at Rugrien. Disconcertingly Rugrien waggled back.

‘I’ve got some paper in here somewhere,’ Jason said, patting at his pockets. ‘You know, in case you want to leave her your autograph.’

‘Sod off.’

‘Bit weird, though.’

‘What that someone should respect my work as much as she does?’ Benny replied.

‘I just meant it’s strange that she’s so happy you’re here. This tomb is supposed to be the biggest find ever made on this planet – history-busting. Any archaeologist worth her salt would be mining the approaches to keep rivals away, not handing it off with a smile to the first so-called expert who swans by.’

‘Then perhaps it’s fortunate not everyone on this base is as petty as you seem to be, Mr Kane.’ Simon strode past the pair, driving his hand into the swinging door of the accommodation block and fair punching it open. He disappeared inside, pointedly – in Benny’s opinion – not checking to make sure the door didn’t floor Jason on the backswing.

‘Captain Dadd!’ Simon’s voice thundered from inside. ‘Debriefing in ten minutes!’ Jason started to say something.

‘Don’t,’ Benny shot back at him. ‘Just don’t.’

Jason shovelled the grey paste into his mouth, swallowing it down with a grimace. He’d never been a fan of army cuisine, but the slop on offer in Jarghk’s mess hall was a new low. Kyle’s decision to turn the day into Five Go On A Forced March had left Jason so bloody hungry, however, he was already onto his second helping.

‘How did your little chat with the Admiral go?’ he mumbled through a gloopy mouthful.

Caroline Dadd set down her fork. ‘Just about how I expected.’ She puffed out her chest – Jason stopped chewing – and deepened her voice. ‘“You are aware, Captain, that you are a Spacefleet officer and your behaviour should reflect as such? Your fraternisation with Kane is to cease at once!”’

Jason grinned. ‘Good to see the message sunk in.’ He picked up a beaker of fluid and swilled away the taste in his mouth. ‘He’s got a point, though. You’re not what I expected from a Spacefleet captain.’

‘And what was that?’

‘Hard. Official. Humourless.’

‘Oh, I was very good at all those, once upon a time,’ Caroline responded. ‘Much good it did me.’

Jason leaned in. ‘Go on.’

‘I was in command of a cruiser at Epsilon Orphak.’ Jason stared blankly. ‘We were escorting supply ships to the rimworlds and got

ambushed by pirates. I did everything right, but they still took us apart. There was an enquiry, the brass needed a scapegoat and here I am, supervising construction in a jungle in the arse end of nowhere. Skeleton staff, shit supplies and bugger all recreational facilities.’ She took a drink. ‘I figured that if I was going to spend the rest of my career doing this kind of work, I’d nothing to lose by letting my hair down a bit.’

Jason eyed her auburn tresses. ‘So that’s why Kyle gives you such a hard time?’

‘He can’t have me disciplined too severely because it’d mean someone else would have to take command of the base. Spacefleet’s still so short of officers that, if I got slung in the stockade, Kyle would have to pull a decent one from active duty to take my place here. Not going to happen, so he has to settle for rapping me over the knuckles every couple of days.’

‘He still trusts you, though.’

‘Got no choice, has he? I’m the only person he knows for certain didn’t kill Ivo.’

‘Hello.’ Jason nodded towards the servery. Caroline swivelled in her seat to see Rugrien standing with a loaded tray in her hands, scanning the room. ‘The Bernice Summerfield Fan Club is now in session.’

Rugrien checked out the occupants of every table – no more than twelve people in all – then sloped off to a table on her own, disappointment plain on her yellowed face.

‘I’d have thought she’d sit with us,’ Caroline said. ‘I mean, you’re a paid up member of the Bernice Brigade, aren’t you?’

‘Paid up and still paying,’ said Jason sullenly.

‘She doesn’t trust you around women?’

‘She doesn’t trust me around certain kinds of women.’

Caroline laughed loudly. ‘Then I suppose I should be flattered.’

‘Benny supposes you should be flattened.’

‘Lucky she’s not here then,’ said Caroline with mock relief. ‘Come to that I haven’t seen her since we got back from the clearing. You?’

Jason shook his head. Whatever Benny was doing, it was more important than spending time with him.

Light strobed across Benny’s face, thrown out from the viewscreen into the darkened lab. It hadn’t been darkened when Benny had first sat down, but watching the holo-recreation of Ivo’s murder time after time after time, she’d failed to notice that the sun had long since set.

In the computer-generated representation of the jungle clearing, the image of the killer hurled the Ivo-avatar from the clifftop and the programme halted. Benny directed the reconstruction to begin again.

There had to be something there she could work with, some clue

about why anyone would want poor, harmless Ivo dead.

The lab's main lights cut in. Benny winced, screwing up her eyes.

When she opened them, she saw Vala at the door. 'I can turn them off again, if you'd like. I see rather well in the dark.'

'No, no, leave them,' Benny said.

Vala padded across the room and settled into a neighbouring seat.

The demi-lemur sniffed, something Benny now recognised as habitual rather than dismissive, as she'd thought back in the lift of the Balgoris Imperial.

'Have you had any success, Professor?'

Benny sat back. 'Not a sausage, and I've watched it a gazillion times. Want a go?'

'Of course,' Vala said, leaning into the screen. Any hint of the distress Benny saw in Vala back at the clearing when they first watched the recreation had gone, and Vala observed the run-through with an objective lack of passion in her huge dark eyes. She's started to come to terms with it, Benny thought, got over the shock. It occurred to Benny that she had herself become inured to the horrors played out on the CG landscape, and she pushed back against the surge of guilt that threatened to overtake her. It wasn't that she didn't care, she told herself – she just cared too much to allow grief or horror at Ivo's fate to get in the way of finding his killer.

'We could expand the programme's parameters,' Benny suggested as the screen went black. 'Get it to theorise about how the killer escaped instead of how he killed Ivo. Might give us a new lead.'

'As I understand it, Captain Dadd is currently correlating the data taken from the clearing for input into just such a programme,' Vala remarked. 'Your husband is assisting her.'

Ex-husband. That thought was jumping into Benny's head a hell of a lot lately. 'Good. I was just thinking she needs a hand.' Hard, across the face.

Vala turned to Benny, studying her with the same intensity she'd studied the screen. 'Do please tell me if I am intruding, but I have been unable to miss that you and Mr Kane are... at odds.'

'Hah!' Benny snorted. 'How did you work that out?'

'From the long silences between you, broken only by bouts of snide bickering,' Vala responded guilelessly.

Okay. Sarcasm bypass ahoy, 'Jason and I have a complex relationship,' Benny said. 'He keeps getting into relationships with anyone in possession of ovaries, and I get a complex about it.'

'You are referring to the time he's spending with Captain Dadd.'

'No, please, call me Caroline'. Yeah, her, or Nicky Kiyomoto, or any of the Spacefleet auxiliaries at the funeral. And that's just on this trip.'

‘You cannot trust him around women.’

‘About as far as I can spit a dropship.’

Vala tilted her head to one side. ‘So why do you remain with him?’

Bernice stared at the dark of the computer screen. ‘That is the question,’ she murmured.

‘Pardon me for interrupting, ladies.’ Simon Kyle stood in the doorway, arms clasped behind his back. Since returning from the clearing he had changed into a uniform of fatigue trousers and khaki T-shirt and Benny was alarmed to realise that the first thing she noticed about the septuagenarian was his enviable muscle-tone.

‘What do you want?’ Benny rallied quickly. If she spat the question with enough venom perhaps he wouldn’t spot that she was staring.

‘I was passing, and I thought...’

‘What, that you’d listen in on our conversation, pick up some juicy titbits?’

Kyle’s shoulders sagged – he wasn’t going to get out of this one without some lumps. ‘I was merely checking to see if you had made any progress with the holo-programme. I can see that you have not.’

Benny stared at him, unblinking, while Vala’s eyes skated from the pair to minutely examine another, innocuous part of the room.

‘Perhaps I should leave you to it.’

‘Permission to leave, *Admiral*,’ Benny barked.

Kyle’s boot steps echoed down the corridor, fading then gone entirely. Vala exhaled loudly. ‘I am not sure that you are taking the correct attitude with the Admiral,’ she ventured.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Whatever issues you have with him, and, if I may be so bold as to say, with your husband, it may be wise to put them aside until we have accomplished our mission here. We will only serve to aid the cause of Ivo’s murderer by continuation of hostilities amongst ourselves.’

Benny bit back the angry retort that had charged to the front of her brain. Vala was bloody annoying, but she was right.

A lot like Ivo used to be.

Benny threw her hands into the air. ‘Who am I trying to fool here? Ivo was kind, sweet, generous – and I can’t think of a single reason why anyone would want him dead because beyond that I don’t know the first thing about him. I tell everyone he was my friend, but I knew him for three days. *Three days*, and it’s been fifty years since I last saw him. Fifty years when he could have given anyone a reason to kill him, anyone at all. How can I find out who murdered him when I don’t have the first flaming clue what he was up to in all that time?’

‘Oh, that’s easy,’ Vala answered. ‘He was looking for you.’

*Chapter House, Order of the Lost Lemuroidea,
Proxima Xaynor, 2562*

‘You admit freely to this?’

‘I do, Abbot Elix.’

Ivo fidgeted in his seat. The Abbot’s office was cold at this time of night, exacerbating the chill he felt after delivering his confession. It had been just a couple of hours since he and Benny had been dropped off by the Comma31 transport and Ivo had spent the entire time wracked with nervousness. All the time he’d been on a rescue ship bound for Applegren Base, he’d been fine. There was no chapter house on Extant 617: he’d have had time to marshal his arguments before fronting up the Order. But then the transport’s captain – obviously less keen on lugging a shipful of refugees to his pristine military base than he was on dumping them on a civilian world – announced with no small degree of pleasure that the threat of war in the Proxima system had been downgraded.

All passengers would be disembarking on Xaynor after all.

And while the Prince of Mercury’s survivors had cheered as one, Ivo sat silent, his guts transformed into water.

Elix sighed, breath hissing from his vulpine snout. ‘You took an oath never to use violence: to do no hurt or harm. You must have known that even in defence of the life of another, your vow still applied. Just as you must have known that breaking it is grounds for immediate excommunication from the Order.’

‘Yes, Abbot. That is why I have come forward.’ Ivo raised his eyes to the aged, white-ruffed figure sat across from him. ‘I wish to take the Oath of Binding.’

‘It is too late for that, Brother Ivo. You needed to have taken the Oath before you used violence in this Summerfield woman’s defence. It cannot be taken with hindsight.’

‘She carries my mark, Abbot.’

Abbot Elix squinted to focus on the young initiate. ‘Indeed?’

‘Yes, Abbot. I placed it on her the evening before it became necessary to defend her. In an instance of previously signalled intent, I understand that precedent allows me to take the oath after the fact.’

‘What you say can be easily confirmed: the mark would remain on her for several days.’ Elix rose shakily to his feet, steadying himself on the desk with his hands. The silver disc hanging around his neck swung smoothly with the movement, its many spokes catching and refracting the light into Ivo’s eyes. Ivo looked down, then up again,

quickly, fearful that breaking the Abbot's gaze would make him appear deceitful. 'If you speak the truth then you have shown great foresight, Brother Ivo. When one of our number is bound to another living creature by the Oath, the Order will indeed permit the limited use of violent means in the defence of that pledge. Do you wish to pledge your life to the service of this woman?'

'I do.'

'And in the performance of that service, are you ready to lay down your own life in the defence of hers?'

'I am.'

Elix scratched at his nose. 'You believe she will accept such a service?'

'I do. We are already great friends. Her companionship means more to me than the company of any other creature. I believe she feels the same about me.'

'So why not simply travel with her?' Elix asked. 'Why is the oath necessary?'

'Her lifestyle involves great risk, Abbot, even if she would not admit as much. Her life was threatened several times aboard the *Prince of Mercury*, even before I made the decision to pledge myself to her. The very first time we met she was suffering from a blade wound.' Ivo gazed beseechingly at the venerable leader. 'She is a fine woman, most deserving of the loyalty and friendship of all who cross her path. It would be fitting service to the Order and its teachings if I were to pledge myself to her.'

'In perpetuity?'

'In perpetuity.'

'And what of your task to locate a new homeworld for our Order? Will you abandon that for this woman?'

'I can continue with my duty as before,' Ivo said eagerly. 'Bernice leads a life of travel, by remaining with her I too will journey to many new planets and civilisations. It is likely one will be suitable for our resettlement.'

Elix stood, silent for a moment. 'Very well,' he nodded. 'You are required to return here in the morning with this woman and present yourselves to me in the main chapel. You will take the Oath and bind yourself to her, at which time your use of violence on board the starliner will be excused. Where is the woman now?'

'At the Excelsior Hotel, near the spaceport,' Ivo explained. 'We docked only a couple of hours ago, I thought it best to leave her there to rest while I came here to explain myself. She has agreed to accompany me here in the morning.'

'She is unaware of your intentions?' Elix asked.

'She thinks she will be coming for a... a tour. To meet my people.'

Elix smiled. 'As it should be. Prior knowledge by the recipient of a pledge is –'

'Frowned upon to prevent undue exertion of influence by outsiders on an Order member to take the oath,' Ivo grinned back. 'I understand, Abbot.'

'Then return to the hotel, Brother Ivo. Sleep and return in the morning. We shall accept your oath and you shall continue your good works.'

'Thank you, Abbot.' Ivo padded to the door. 'This means everything to me.'

Ivo bounced through the revolving doors of the Excelsior. He'd only been away from Benny for a short time, yet he missed her company more than he'd missed anyone else in his life. During their days aboard the Prince of Mercury, he'd seen in her a spirit that mirrored his own – lost, looking for meaning in life, for someone to trust. And while Ivo's vows meant that any kind of physical relationship was impossible between them, Ivo had recognised the depth of feeling she had for him. That night in their cabin, as she opened up to him about the man who had betrayed her, who had broken her heart to save his own skin, Ivo had seen it in her eyes.

Benny loved him. And Ivo loved her.

As she had fallen asleep on her bunk, Ivo had brushed his foot across her forehead, smoothing the hair from her eyes. At the same time he had used the action to smear his own peculiar scent on her, secreted from a gland in the foot and as unique to the demi-lemurs as a fingerprint. It was the first step in dedicating himself to her, the statement of intent that allowed him to fight on her behalf later in the trip. The Oath of Binding was one of the most solemn vows a brother in the Order could take. It was the closest thing that a monk could ever get to marriage.

On his travels, Ivo had once visited a mining planet whose star was blinding in its brilliance. And as Ivo stepped into the lift that would take him to his room, the smile on his face was brighter even than the Balgoran sun.

Resisting the temptation to knock on Benny's door – it was late, and there was little doubt she would be asleep after so trying a journey –

Ivo fumbled with the keycard for his own room. Finally swiping it through the reader with trembling, thrill-charged fingers, he stepped inside. A papery rustle drifted up from the carpet – his foot had brushed a note that had been slipped under the door. Sweeping a hand across the wall until it connected with the light switch, Ivo bent down to retrieve the message, a rectangle of paper folded down the middle, slightly off centre so that the halves of the sheet didn't quite

match up. Insinuating a thumb into the fold, he opened it out.

Ivo,

Met a spacer in the bar who thinks he knows where my father is! He's offered to take me there, and his ship leaves in an hour. It might come to nothing, but I can't take the chance. Knew you'd understand!

Back in a fortnight!

Benny

'Gone?'

'Yes, Abbot Elix.'

'Without informing you first?'

'Yes, Abbot.'

'This is most unfortunate.' Elix grunted, although Ivo was sure he was referring as much to his having been hauled from his bed for the second time in a night as he was to Benny's disappearance. 'You advised me that a bond existed between you, a foundation on which your oath could be settled. Perhaps she does not hold your friendship in as high regard as you imagine.'

'These are extreme circumstances, Abbot,' pleaded Ivo. 'She was presented with a chance to find her father, for whom she has been searching for many years now. She could not allow the opportunity to pass.'

'You make excuses for her, Brother Ivo,' Elix grumphed. 'I understand your devotion to her, what must be questioned is her devotion to you.' He hobbled around the room to the window, gazing out into the street below. 'You are one of our brightest, Ivo FitzIndri.'

It pains me to do this.

'Brother Ivo, you have committed an act of violence in direct contravention of your vows as a member of our Order. Without the presence of this Summerfield woman at the Oath ceremony, that act cannot be expunged. I will permit you to seek her out and return with her to any Chapter House of our Order so that the ceremony may take place. Until that time, your name will carry the dishonour you have brought upon yourself and you shall be excluded from all gatherings and resources pertaining to the Order. Order members shall not recognise you, nor shall they acknowledge you.'

'Yes, Abbot,' said Ivo quietly.

'If, as you say, this woman is to return in two weeks, you will not have to bear your shame for long. All will be put right. Until that time, however, you are to be expelled from our sight.' Elix sighed, sinking back into his seat. 'Leave your medallion at the door and go. Return with Bernice Summerfield or do not return at all.'

‘The story goes that he waited for you on Proxima Xaynor for three weeks,’ Vala said. ‘When his funds ran out, he was forced to work as a kitchen hand at the Excelsior – the Order’s finances were closed to him. He had no idea where you had flown to, and by the time he finally left the planet, your trail was utterly cold. It took him months to pick it up again.’

‘He spent years following in your footsteps, always arriving at your last known location only to find that you’d already moved on. With no resources to his name, his journeys took too long. Having to work for his passages and to earn enough credits to survive meant he was always moving too slowly to make up the ground on you.’

‘That’s why I knew everyone at his funeral,’ Benny whispered.

‘Vyshinsky, Sarah, all of them. Everyone I ever met, he met after me. All the places I ever went...’

‘He lost track of you completely on a world called Heaven,’ Vala went on. ‘There’d been a disaster of some sort – for years he thought you had died there. Then rumours started to reach him that you were still alive. He started to hear of the Braxiatel Collection. Nothing substantial, but enough to give him hope. So he started looking again.’

‘Then you turn up on the Drome singing some idiot song. Ivo heard about this place and the dig, and already knew about the Order’s temple on Balgoris. He knew you were coming here and wanted to make arrangements for the oath-taking ceremony, ready for when you arrived. He was finally going to redeem his name.’

‘But someone killed him first,’ Benny muttered. She felt like someone had tied a rock to her heart, tugging it down. ‘It’s what Sarah was trying to tell me at the wake. I meet these people, change things for them, then shoot off without a second thought.’ Her eyes felt hot, she rubbed them, lights exploding behind the lids. ‘I’ve been working the archaeology circuit for months. Why didn’t he just contact me? Why wait to surprise me here?’

‘The Order disagrees with pledge recipients knowing about their vows. In the past unscrupulous people have learned of the existence of the Oath of Binding and tricked members of the Order into taking it. They turned many brothers into little more than slaves. No one is permitted to know about their pledges or that they are about to be pledged to until the ceremony itself, to avoid such misconduct. Ivo would not have felt that he could tell you the truth. The Order might have expelled him, but he still lived by their rules.’

‘Without any of the benefits. The bastards didn’t even send a representative to his funeral.’ Benny looked at Vala, tears prickling her eyes. ‘How come you can tell me about the oath then? And how come you still went to the funeral? You’d be dishonoured just like Ivo.’

Vala lowered her eyes. 'I am already dishonoured, Bernice. Ivo's disgrace does not stop with him alone. I am Ivo's great niece. His entire family bears his shame.'

Benny finally understood: by running off rather than waiting to say goodbye she'd poisoned an entire bloodline.

'That's why you acted the way you did in the lift at the Imperial,' Benny said quietly.

'There's one of my people, a well-respected and influential man. We're – we had hoped to wed, but Ivo's past dishonour dictates that my family is unsuitable for a match with his line. When I saw you in the lift –'

'You blamed me.'

'Yes. But when Admiral Kyle informed me that Ivo had been murdered I realised that you can undo what you have done, however unwittingly.'

'How? Anything, just tell me.'

'You can bring Ivo's killer to justice. Ivo died protecting you. Punish his killer and present yourself to the Order and it will prove the bond between you existed. Even after his death, it will be enough to expunge Ivo's shame.'

'Of course, I'll do that. You'll get your wedding, Vala. I owe you and Ivo so much more than – What did you say?'

'You must capture Ivo's killer and present your –'

'No, no, no, before that.' Benny seized Vala's shoulders, held her firmly. 'You said Ivo died protecting me.'

Vala looked bewildered. 'Naturally. There can be no other interpretation. Observe.'

She reached across to the computer and brought up the simulation of Ivo's death, keying it to replay. The two avatars met, stood in what Benny understood to be conversation, then the holo-Ivo launched itself at his would be killer. Vala paused the playback. 'You see?'

Benny frowned at the screen.

'Ivo struck out against his killer,' she said. 'But he was forbidden to use violence in his own defence, he could only use it in mine. Whoever killed him... they were after me.'

The killer watched as Benny charged from the lab and hustled down the corridor. It would be easy enough to do it now, catch her up, finish her off while she was still off balance. But killing Bernice Summerfield was only half the job... There were still pieces to be moved into place before she could die.

Smiling nonetheless, the killer turned and headed down the corridor in the other direction.

‘It’s obvious then,’ said Dadd. ‘We use her as bait. Draw the killer out and grab him.’

‘Hold on a minute!’ said Jason. ‘No one’s using Benny as bait!’

‘Well, I think that should be my decision, don’t you?’ Benny snapped. ‘I’m not some china bloody doll you know, I can look after myself!’

‘That’s as may be, but we still won’t be tethering out any Judas goats.’ Kyle had been silent all through the argument, outwardly unruffled by Benny’s revelation.

‘Well, you are the Judas expert,’ Benny fired back.

Before she could go on, Kyle held up his hand, and Benny was surprised to find her mouth remaining closed. ‘Let us be clear. I have no problem whatsoever in placing Professor Summerfield at risk. She is probably more capable of looking after herself than half the soldiers in this base. My concern is that we simply don’t know enough about this killer to set an effective trap for him. For a start, how did he get out of the clearing so quickly after killing Ivo? Until we know how our man is getting around undetected, we can’t be sure any snare we set will hold him.’

Dadd sat forward in her seat, applying herself to the discussion.

‘Jason and I have almost completed reprogramming the forensic simulator to theorise the killer’s escape route. The best we have so far is that the killer was wearing Spacefleet standard combat boots –’

‘A couple of miles from an army base?’ Benny sneered. ‘Nice one, Miss Marple.’

Dadd shot her an acrimonious look. ‘If I may? He was wearing Spacefleet boots that left tracks away from the edge of the cliff, towards the far edge of the clearing. They stopped at a rock several metres from the treeline.’

Vala nudged Benny. ‘At least we know now that he didn’t jump after Ivo.’

‘Yeah. Cross that one off our list of ooh, two possibilities.’

‘You think he used the rock as a coordinate fix for a matter transporter?’ Kyle asked.

‘We don’t have enough data to scan for particle disruption,’ Jason chipped in. ‘Most of the forensics collected at the time was geared towards how the killer did it, not how he got away. We’ll keep sifting what we’ve got, but we might have to go back and take more readings.’

‘Very well,’ Kyle concluded. ‘You and Captain Dadd continue as you are.’ He stared at Jason. ‘Maintain your focus, the pair of you. I’m sure I need not remind you that time is a factor here. Vala, I would like you to start backtracking Ivo’s travels before he arrived on Balgoris. If the real target here is Summerfield, and she’s only just arrived on this

planet, it's likely our killer is also an off-worlder. See if there's anything to point to it being someone Ivo met before he arrived at Jarghk Station. If it was someone from outside the base, I want to know where their paths crossed.'

'I thought I might start by examining Ivo's personal effects,' Vala ventured.

'No need,' Kyle snapped back. 'I went through his quarters personally just after his body was found. Nothing there, so I ordered them sealed.'

'But surely a fresh pair –'

'Proceed as I have directed, Miss Prejaq,' Kyle ordered, before pulling himself up short. 'If you please.'

'And what am I supposed to do?' Benny asked. 'Stay in my room and hide under the bedclothes?'

'Far from it, Professor. You will accompany me to the dig site. Ivo had developed an interest in the place before you arrived. It could be that something he learned there tipped him off to the plot against you.'

'I'd rather go on my own, if it's all the same to you.'

'It isn't.' Kyle glanced up at the chronometer on the meeting room wall and rose to his feet. 'Right, it's late, I suggest we all get what sleep we can and start work tomorrow. Oh, and first thing in the morning I'd like you all to report to the quartermaster to draw personal firearms. Dismissed.'

'Aye, aye,' Benny murmured sourly as she tramped out the door.

'Captain Dadd,' Kyle called. 'A word before you leave.'

Dadd rolled her eyes at Jason. 'Here we go,' she breathed. She waited until Jason had left the room, then turned to the Admiral. 'Yes, sir?'

'Got an assignment for you.'

'Sir?'

'Ignore the Professor. Wait until she's safely in her room, then post a pair of guards outside it.'

The personnel vehicle bounced along the dirt road into the jungle. Benny clung to the door frame for support as Simon swerved around a bend.

‘I want them gone!’ she shouted over the growling of the engine.

‘Who?’ Simon yelled back.

‘The guards you oh-so-subtly stuck outside my door last night.’

‘They’re for your protection.’

‘Then you’d better get protection for the protection,’ Benny howled back, indicating the newly requisitioned blaster at her hip, ‘because if they’re there tonight I’m going to shoot them.’

‘You’re being highly unreasonable, Professor!’

‘Well, maybe you make me unreasonable, Admiral!’

Before Simon could respond, the transporter rumbled into a small clearing. He hopped clear of the car the moment it came to a standstill.

Ha! Benny thought. Jumped up little backstabber. Always ran off when he didn’t have an answer.

Thumping down onto the dirt – dried out by the fierce sun now that there were no longer any trees to protect it – Benny gazed around. An off-white tent had been set up in the centre of the clearing.

Presumably the tomb’s entrance lay underneath it, shielded from the elements. Off to one side sat a yellow and black-striped earthclearer, encrusted with dirt. Benny had read that when the survey team first found the tomb, they’d been prevented from clearing the area by simply bombing the hell out of it. Might damage the finds, see?

Instead they’d have used the huge molecular disruptor on the front of the earthclearer to atomise anything in its way while still keeping clear of the tomb. Positively civilised by comparison. Unless you were a tree or slow-moving wildlife.

‘Professor!’ Benny turned to see Professor Rugrien hurrying excitedly towards her. Ignoring Kyle completely, she lanced out an abrasive hand, catching hold of Benny’s and resuming the enthusiastic shaking she’d broken off the day before. ‘I’m so pleased you’ve come. This way, this way, this way’s the way in!’

Like a temperamental toddler, Benny let herself be half-dragged towards the tent. ‘Here we are: the Library of Jarghk!’ Rugrien paused, a little sheepish. ‘Of course, that’s just the name I’ve given it, until you can come up with something better. The Summerfield Archive perhaps?’

Benny examined Rugrien’s face for any trace of irony. ‘Well, let’s

have a look, shall we?’

‘Yes.’ Kyle stood off to one side, arms folded. ‘Please proceed, Professor Rugrien.’

‘After you, Professor Summerfield,’ Rugrien deferred.

‘No, no, Professor, after you.’

‘But I insist!’

‘Oh for God’s sake,’ muttered Simon, pushing through the gap in the fabric. Benny raised her eyebrows to Rugrien, who smiled in return. Rugrien may be a clingy fan-girl, Benny mused, but if she wound up Simon Kyle then she was allowed the odd star-struck moment.

A single, solid slab lay on the side of the tent furthest away from the flaps, presumably to allow instant and unimpeded access to the raised wall into which it originally slotted. The wall – about 30 centimetres high, protruding from the dust – surrounded a dark, grim pit. Benny peered into it and could just about identify steps leading down into the darkness. She ran her fingers lightly over the rocky surface. In the shade of the tent, the stone looked faintly grey, but Benny could tell it would be almost pure white when exposed to the Balgoran sun. The workmanship was precise and well tooled, suggesting sophistication. She felt a presence next to her and looked up at Simon. ‘Have you been inside?’ she asked.

‘Professor Rugrien has.’

‘It’s remarkable, Professor, truly it is,’ Rugrien gushed. Benny noticed that out of the sunlight Rugrien’s eyes had lost their milky appearance. It had been skin, she realised, a thin set of eyelids for use in bright light. Handy on this planet.

‘So what are we waiting for?’ Benny asked. Stepping over the wall, she proceeded down the stairs. Rugrien had fixed lumo-strips to the walls of the staircase, lending the descent a bilious hue. Benny guessed she’d come down a hundred or so metres before the steps gave way to a cold, low passageway, extending another twenty metres. Benny and Rugrien had no trouble with it, but Kyle was made to stoop. Benny pressed on, concealing her trepidation from the others. At the far end of the passage, a pair of massive stone doors barred the way.

‘Allow me, Professor Summerfield.’ Rugrien edged past Benny and reached to the side of the portals to depress a small stone square. ‘It took me a day to find that.’

A gasp of released air heralded motion from the twin doors. Rugrien grinned broadly. ‘The mechanism the architects used to create the doors has made them completely airtight. That accounts for the perfect preservation of the artefacts! Astounding, isn’t it?’

Astounding is right, Benny thought. The doors swung outwards with a swift, serene ease, not at all what she would have expected from

something so old. It was like someone had oiled the hinges.

Whoever had ordered this place to be built was either wealthy enough to afford the very best craftsmanship or the ancient Balgorans were spoilt for choice when it came to talented stonemasons.

'You'll need these before you go in. I didn't want to put up lumostrips in the main chamber.' Rugrien rummaged in her myriad pockets and retrieved three energy lamps, sewn into cloth bands. Passing one to Benny and one to Kyle, she strapped the third around her head, positioning the light in the centre of her forehead like a 20th century miners' lamp. Fixing her own light into position and clicking it on, Benny peered into the cavernous interior.

It was indeed a tomb. Benny could see paintings around the walls that were readily identifiable as funeral decorations, pots and grave goods positioned beneath the illustrations.

Oh, and the sarcophagus was a dead giveaway.

Kyle wandered over to the side wall, directing his lamp beam at the paintings. 'This is interesting,' he called out. 'Similar to the tomb murals on Rossix, wouldn't you say?'

Benny boggled: since when had Simon Kyle had any knowledge of archaeology? He'd never shown any interest in it when they were together. For a brief instant, she saw what her life could have been like with Kyle, gradually getting to know each other over the years, discovering their common passions together rather than at opposite ends of the galaxy. She might have been genuinely happy with him...

All the more reason not to get too close to the bastard now.

'Have you opened it?' Benny asked, squatting next to the sarcophagus and running her fingers over the stone inscriptions on its side.

'Not yet,' Rugrien answered. 'I thought we could do that together.'

Still squatting, Benny allowed her eyes to drift to the floor. A faint powdering of stone dust covered the ground next to the sarcophagus – displaced when the lid had been shifted. You lying cow, Benny thought. Then again, she probably wouldn't have resisted a sneaky peek too, if it had been her here first. And if she'd been a total amateur.

'Look at these, Professor,' Rugrien called, the light on her head bobbing back and forth.

'You're going to have to start calling me Benny, you know,' she said, pushing herself to her feet. 'We can't both stick to shouting "Professor" at each other.'

'You honour me, Pro– Benny. Do please call me Raycl.'

'Right you are. So what's this then?'

Rugrien gestured to a small altar, a receptacle on top. 'Flint and steel,' Rugrien breathed, pointing upwards. 'To light those.'

Benny peered up, her torchlight catching a number of brass oil lamps suspended from the ceiling. 'He thought he was going to wake up.'

'And when he did, he would need something to read...' Rugrien declared, directing Benny further back into the tomb.

The burial chamber opened out into a great vault, filled far beyond the light of Benny's torch with row upon row of immense stone shelves. Each shelf bore dozens of carefully stacked books, scrolls and folios, hundreds of thousands of texts.

'There must be... how much do we know about the Balgorans?'

Benny asked, eyes wide with wonder.

'Almost nothing,' Rugrien replied.

'These writings, they could account for the complete history of a civilisation. They're priceless. Simon, you don't need to put guards on me. You need to put them on this. Yesterday.'

'Perhaps that's it,' Kyle suggested.

'That's what?'

'What if there's something here that someone doesn't want anyone to know about? What if they were prepared to kill to keep it secret?'

Benny turned her light on the Admiral. 'You're saying someone's trying to kill me to stop me reading all this?' She laughed. 'Reading non-stop for the rest of my life, I'd be dead before I even got a third of the way through.'

'But you have access to the facilities to have each and every work in this tomb studied by an army of academics. How long would that take?'

Bastard, Benny thought. He might have a point. 'All right, so say they're worried I'll march a battalion of dusty old professors from the Collection in here and have the whole place analysed. It'd still take years.'

'We could be looking for a local, then,' Kyle wondered aloud. 'They're all back at the resort waiting for it to start making money, but they won't see a single brass credit until the dig is given the all clear. If that'll take years, even with your connections, they'll be ruined. So, kill off anyone sent to analyse the library and the problem goes away.'

'Assuming that's true,' Benny rejoined, 'why pick on me? Rugrien here's been poking around more than I have. Why aren't they trying to kill her?' Off in the shadows, Benny heard a slight squeak.

'A reasonable point. I'll appoint guards to Professor Rugrien immediately.'

'Thank you, Admiral,' Rugrien whimpered. 'I would certainly appreciate that.'

'We're settled then,' Benny chimed. 'Raycl here gets my guards, we

seal this place back up for a bit, find the killer, reopen the library for examination and head home for a swift drink. Sorted.'

'Professor Rugrien,' Kyle said, blithely ignoring Benny. 'I'd like you to recall every conversation you had with Ivo about this place. There's a chance our killer overheard you and formed his plan from there. Can you do that?'

'It will be much easier to think with those guards outside my door, Admiral.'

'I'll detail the men at once.' Kyle paced off towards the entrance, followed by an eagerly scuttling Rugrien. Benny dawdled around at the rear, following Rugrien up the steps. Her eyes level with the professor's back, Benny spotted a book poking out from one of her many pockets. Probably the bloody *Gwenan Enigma*, she thought, until, emerging from the subterranean staircase, she glimpsed the book's title in the filtered daylight.

A brand new edition of Benny's papers on Martian archaeology.

'This is useless.' Jason flipped the datapad across the table, watching it slide to a stop mere millimetres from the edge. 'Most of the scans were focused on the exact area where Ivo was killed. We're going to have to go back and take more readings.'

'First thing in the morning, then. Easy.' Caroline Dadd leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms high above her head. Jason tried not to think about the way the movement tightened and accentuated certain salient features of her body. He really, really had to patch things up with Benny.

'Excuse me, Captain.'

Dadd twisted around in her seat (the word 'taut' flashed into Jason's head) to face the young soldier in the doorway. 'Yes, Private -' she squinted at the soldier's ID tag '- Wearing?'

'Admiral Kyle asked me to check in with you. He would like a progress report. Please. Captain.'

Jason smothered his smile. It wouldn't do to crack up laughing at the poor guy when he was so obviously ill at ease around Dadd.

Barely out of his teens and sent to do Kyle's dirty work - it was lucky Spacefleet didn't still go in for all that killing-the-messenger business.

'Did he now?' Caroline was now sitting completely straight in her seat, all military efficiency and proper conduct. Jason had become so used to her relaxed approach to soldiery that it was easy for him to forget she was career military. 'Please return to the Admiral and inform him that Mr Kane and I will be going off base in the morning to gather more data from the site.'

The private stood, virtually paralysed. Dadd rolled her eyes.

‘Dismissed, Private Wearing.’

As the awkward youth hustled from the room, Jason observed the change in Caroline, the barely noticeable loosening of the limbs and relaxation of command presence. ‘And if the Admiral wants any more information, he can toddle down here and ask me himself,’ she grinned.

Jumping to her feet, she snatched her jacket from the back of the seat and slipped her arms inside. ‘Well, I reckon that’s us done for the night. Drink?’

Jason rubbed a hand across his face, the stubble scratching at his fingertips. He ought to find Benny, ought to fix things between them.

‘No, I think I’ll just get some rest, thanks.’

Caroline smiled exactly the kind of smile Jason always deployed when he was trying to charm Benny into something. God, she was good. ‘Come on. We know what all work and no play makes, don’t we?’ She grabbed his arm and hauled him from his chair.

‘You’re supposed to be a soldier,’ he remarked. ‘Are you even allowed to have fun? Aren’t you supposed to be all proper and stiff?’

Her eyes sparkled mischievously. ‘Where does it say you can’t be stiff and have fun?’

Benny’s head spun with details as she showered off the dirt from the underground excursion and changed into fresh fatigues. Kyle’s theories about the tomb, Vala’s suggestion that Benny should bury the hatchet with Jason, Jason’s constant flirting with Dadd... they all jostled for position in her over-taxed brain.

Time to sort some of it out, she decided. Buckling her pistol to her thigh, she opted to find Jason first, apologise for being snotty with him and explain what she’d learned from the dig. He might be able to give her a different perspective about the role of the library in Ivo’s death. Maybe he’d even have some answers about the murderer’s vanishing trick by now. He wasn’t entirely useless on technical stuff like that.

She rounded the corner to the main holo-lab just in time to see Captain Dadd hauling Jason away.

‘So you’re telling me this place has vodka?’ he asked. ‘It doesn’t even have proper food yet!’

‘Well they shouldn’t have left me in charge of the catering manifests, should they?’ laughed Dadd.

Benny watched the pair giggle their way around a corner, then kicked open an external door and stomped off into the dark.

Xanthea Boardman stamped her feet, vainly trying to restore feeling to her toes. Balgoris may be one of the hottest planets in the sector by day, but the second its sun dipped below the horizon the temperature

fell like a stone metachute. True, her Spacefleet combat suit was fitted with thermo-regulators, the same units that kept soldiers cool during the blistering day serving to warm them up after dark. But some oversight at the supply station had meant that all boots supplied to Jarghk Station were of the standard, no frills variety.

It was somehow worse that her partner for the next four hours, Private Adam Houghton, didn't seem to be feeling the cold at all. Not that he was short of anything to complain about. Adam tried to avoid night duty for entirely different reasons – he hated the boredom.

'God, nightwatch's dull,' he opined, breath white in the darkness.

In the 127 minutes Xanthea had been stationed with him outside the tomb, he'd probably only mentioned the lack of thrills, oh, four or five hundred times. Xanthea wondered if shooting him would actually perk him up.

'All guard duty's dull, Adam, not just nightwatch.'

'Yeah, but at least during the day you can watch people coming and going.'

'We're in the middle of the jungle,' Xanthea sighed. 'No one comes or goes out here, end of.'

To the side of the dirt road, the undergrowth rustled.

'Mine!' Adam exclaimed. 'I'll go check it out, you stay here.'

Xanthea flung an arm across his chest, barring his way. 'Don't be an idiot. It's probably a gnarg or something.'

'And what if it isn't?'

'Then we don't let it split us up and draw us away from what we're guarding, do we?' Xanthea unslung her blaster rifle and took aim at the treeline. 'Halt and identify yourself!'

Seconds crawled by, with no sign of motion from the darkness.

Concern slithering through her veins, Xanthea took a couple of steps forward. 'I say again, show yourself!' Again, nothing. 'Sod this, I'm calling it in,' she hissed.

'It's all right, Private. I'm allowed to be out here.'

Xanthea saw a dark shape detach from the shadows. She aimed at the silhouette. 'That's far enough.'

'Sorry, Private. Got lost in the dark. Lost the whole road, actually. Only got my bearings again when I heard your voices.'

Xanthea kept her gun on the newcomer. 'I'll have to report you being out here.'

'Ah. Okay. Look, I'm cleared to be out here, but no one actually knows that I am. Admiral Kyle would string me up from the main antenna if he found out I was here on my own...'

Xanthea looked doubtful. 'So what are you doing out here at this time of night?'

'I just came to get something I left in the tomb this morning. I'll

grab it then I'll be off. Never know I was here. I won't tell if you don't. Promise.'

Xanthea lowered her gun. There was no denying the new arrival was authorised for entry to the dig and everyone knew that her relationship with Admiral Kyle was rocky. Why drop her in it? 'All right, Professor Summerfield. Just be quick.'

Vala had spent hours in the company of the day comms officer, Lieutenant Danta, hours of burning up the airwaves as she backtracked Ivo. She'd traced him through six different spaceports and staging points, talked to a legion of port authorities and immigration representatives and interrogated more hotel staff than she'd ever thought possible. The earpiece/microphone rig she'd worn throughout the calls had left what was probably a permanent impression in her skin, and still Vala had come up with absolutely nothing that could help identify Ivo's killer. While she'd worked, Danta had gone off duty and the night officer, Lieutenant Nash, had replaced him. It was two hours before Vala even noticed.

Finally she gave up for the day. Bidding Nash a good night, she slipped from the communications room and out into the compound.

She shivered in the icy air, and hurried across to the accommodation block. Her cold fingers fumbled the door handle, then at last she was inside and warm.

The lighting had been turned down to its minimum setting, to conserve power from the temporary generator that the base engineers were using as a stop-gap until the new main reactor arrived. Vala tiptoed down the semi-darkened corridors, passing no one, aching to get back to her billet and its hard, military bed. Just at that moment, she could have fallen asleep on a spike.

She shuffled past a door to her right, the second or third past the entrance to the accommodation section. She had passed it any number of times since arriving at Jarghk, but something had prevented her from stopping. Respect? Superstition? Fear? She'd never have countenanced a peek inside before, she'd normally be far too timid. But after wasting so many hours for so little return, Vala decided she had no choice.

Reaching out, her fingers connected with the cool metal of the handle. A small twist, and the latch clicked open.

Ivo's peculiar smell pervaded the room. No matter how many hundreds of years since her people had learned to speak, and with that talent gained the ability to lay claim to places and things with language, there were still some demi-lemurs who used their scent glands to mark their territory.

Amongst other things.

Snikking the door shut gently behind her, Vala turned on the lights and looked around. The layout of bed, wardrobe and ablution unit was in parallel to her own room, but kept very neat. She sat down at the small desk tucked into a corner. Vala was certain she wouldn't be able to sleep unless she went to bed with some sort of result for her days efforts, so no matter that Admiral Kyle had already been through Ivo's possessions, she was going to look anyway. A fresh pair of eyes might settle on something he missed. Vala yawned. Well, maybe not so fresh – but a demi-lemur may spot something a human wouldn't.

Clicking on the reading lamp, she leaned over the desk and started riffling through the papers.

The lights were even dimmer in the communications room than in the rest of the base. Lieutenant Nash had waited until the demi-lemur had left, then turned off the overhead lights completely, and settled down in the faint green illumination of the read-outs on his comms desk. The gloom and the silence outside his headset enclosed him, made him feel as if he was in the heart of the base. He wasn't to be disturbed – he was the last man awake to see to the smooth running of things. And that made him special. Important.

Working into the night with Vala had meant that Nash had been forced to delay his nightly signals review. Every evening, he would trawl the message logs, ensuring all outgoing signals had been received, and sorting all incoming transmissions by level of urgency.

Pouring a cup of grey coffee from a flask he'd pilfered from the mess, he began scrolling through the day's activity.

He wasn't long into the job when he spotted it. After weeks spent overseeing communications to and from both the main population centre of Balgoris City and innumerable off-world receivers, Nash had developed a feel for how long a message should take to reach its destination. So the fact that a routine supply request to Charbreth looked to have taken three times longer than normal to transmit stood out like a Killoran at a cocktail party.

His fingers flicked over the keys of his comms station. No other messages seemed to be affected, so chances were there was no problem with the base's broadcast array. A second brief digital jig over the controls – there it was. Something had been spliced into the signal itself. A piggy-back transmission. Sloppy work, if he'd been able to find it this quickly. Then again, he thought, he was the best comms officer in the sector.

He glanced up at the luminous chrono-reading over his control panel. He should be able to isolate the contents and message destination by morning.

Cracking his knuckles, Lieutenant Steven Nash set to work.

It was a wonder the whole base didn't wake up. Vala flung open the door to Ivo's room with such force that the impact echoed down the corridor like a cymbal crash. Without stopping to close the door behind her, she loped swiftly to Benny's room and hammered for admittance.

'Bernice! Bernice! Quickly, open up!'

Not to be discouraged by the lack of response, and reasoning that since she'd entered one room that night uninvited, one more wouldn't make any difference, Vala tried the handle. It turned, and she nipped inside. The lights were off, but her sensitive eyes could see there was nobody home – a quick glimpse was enough to tell Vala that Benny's bed hadn't been slept in.

Now the demi-lemur was at a loss. She could charge up and down the accommodation block, waking everyone up and hoping that someone knew where Benny had got to, but she'd only make enemies, and she really didn't want anyone to see what she'd found until Bernice had a look. Equally, she knew that what she'd found couldn't wait until morning.

Turning to bang at the room next door, Vala was ecstatic to see Benny sauntering up the passage. 'Bernice!'

Benny, head bowed in what Vala guessed was tired contemplation, looked up sharply. Spotting Vala, she smiled curiously. 'What's up?'

'You have to come with me!' Vala blurted, grabbing Benny's arm and hauling her towards Ivo's room. 'You have to see this now!'

'See what?' Benny asked. 'Do you have any idea what time it is?'

'Yes. Do you want to tell me why you're not in bed?'

'I couldn't sleep!' Benny explained as Vala shoved her into Ivo's room. 'I went for a walk!'

'Sit!' Vala commanded, pushing Benny down onto the bed, and angling the desk lamp to shine down on Benny's lap. 'Look.'

The half-lemur handed her a black disc, about the size of a side-plate. As Benny's hands closed around it, Vala engaged a button on its side.

Benny's eyes widened as the disc flashed to life.

'You've got to be kidding.'

* * *

The seek programme had almost isolated the coordinates.

Lieutenant Nash scratched at his scalp through the sparse layer of hair left behind after his last buzz-cut. The piggy-backed message itself would take a while to decode, but he was pleased that its destination at least was being narrowed down. Progress, progress, progress. So far the message had been bounced through nine different relays after arriving at Charbreth and Nash appeared to have finally

identified its last receiver. A large patch of dead space near the Draconian border: sod all there except asteroids. The biggest thing by far was a planetoid, designation KS-159.

Why did that sound familiar?

Benny cycled through the holo-snapshots, each push of the button at the side of the disc bringing up a new three-dimensional image.

Simon Kyle, ten or fifteen years ago, standing in front of a log cabin, his arm around a slight, blonde woman.

Click.

Simon Kyle, older, beaming at the camera, a small child cradled in his arms. The blonde woman tickling under the infant's chin, also smiling.

Unbidden, Jason popped into Benny's head. They'd talked about this, talked about it not even weeks ago...

'We should do this, Benny. Properly. Fulfil our destinies...'

She felt a weight, crushing her from the inside.

Click.

Simon Kyle, standing in front of a stone font, holding the same child. There's a tired looking brunette to one side, to the other a tall, plain-looking man in his military best. Children. Grandchildren. Family. But for that one moment in the forest they could have –

No. No, no, no. Benny's fingers scrabbled for the button on the holo-album.

Click.

Simon Kyle with a boy, ten years old, both wearing shirts from an Earth football team. Simon is frozen in a dive, fingers outstretched to stop a ball kicked by the boy. You can tell Simon's not really trying, he's letting the ball get past, allowing the boy to score. You can tell the boy knows too. You can tell that both are having so much fun that neither cares.

Click.

Simon Kyle stands to attention as the President of Earth pins the latest in a long line of medals to the chest of his immaculate dress uniform. A banner behind them proclaims that 'Earth welcomes the heroes of Thaxia Minora'.

Click.

Click.

Click.

At last Benny allowed the holo-album to drop to the bed, still projecting images onto its smooth black surface. There was no point in looking at it any more, she knew what she would see. Decades of pictures all showing Simon Kyle as a respected leader, staunch soldier, loving husband and devoted parent. Decades of pictures that told of

how Kyle had led a full, happy life while Benny had struggled to overcome the blight he had inflicted upon her own. Decades of pictures that all had one more element in common besides Simon Kyle.

Every picture – every single one going back twenty years or more – also featured Ivo FitzIndri.

‘How could he do that?’ she said, as much to herself as to Vala. ‘He knew what Kyle did to me. He knew Simon Kyle destroyed my life. And he ran off and became best friends with him.’

‘Perhaps there’s more to it than that,’ Vala offered. ‘Whatever the reason Ivo and the Admiral became friends, these pictures show that Admiral Kyle knows more about Ivo than he’s been telling us. We need to ask him wha–’

‘No.’ Benny had to force the word out, the tightening in her throat almost choking away the power of speech. ‘No.’

She rose to her feet, shaking, and wobbled to the door. Steadying herself on the frame, she lurched into the corridor.

‘Bernice? Where are you going?’

‘Bed.’

‘But we have to confront Admiral Kyle with this. He may have the key to finding the killer.’

‘So find him!’ Benny shouted. ‘Find him, arrest him, shoot him, do whatever you bloody well want to do, Vala. I don’t sodding care.’

‘But you have to help us, Bernice. You have to redeem Ivo’s honour with the Order, otherwise –’

‘I don’t have to do anything for Ivo, full stop,’ Benny spat. ‘He betrayed me, Vala. He knew what Simon was like and he betrayed me. He doesn’t deserve his honour back, he deserves to rot. Now if you’ll excuse me, there’s a knife I really need to pull out of my back.’

* * *

‘What about my –’ Vala began, but Benny was already gone.

She knew there was someone else in the room without even needing to open her eyes. Shit. She’d been so devastated when she collapsed into her bed that she’d forgotten to lock the door.

Slowly, hoping that her movement wouldn’t alert the intruder, Benny slipped her hand from where it rested at the side of her head and slid it under the pillow. Working her palm around the coolness of the blaster’s grip, she tensed herself, and sprang.

The pillow caught the intruder in the face, he staggered backwards, throwing a hand out to the wall to recover, but by that time Benny had the gun up and pointed at his chest. Even when she saw who the mystery man was, she was tempted to open fire regardless.

‘You can piss right off. Now.’

Simon Kyle straightened up. 'I need to talk to you, Benny.'

Benny flicked off the safety. 'No, what you need to do is stop calling me Benny. My friends get to call me that. You get to call me Professor. As in, "Sorry, Professor, I'll be leaving your room immediately so please don't blow an arsing great hole in me".'

'I spoke to Vala. She told me what happened. I've come to -'

'Talk me round? Good luck with that.'

'I've not been entirely honest with you,' Kyle sighed.

Benny laughed bitterly. That's like a Dalek admitting to being a little bit xenophobic.' She jerked her weapon in the direction of the exit. 'Out.'

'You can't blame Ivo. You don't know all the facts.'

'Oh, and you're here to tell them to me, are you? Well, you'll forgive me if I don't trust you, Kyle, but I've had one or two bad experiences with that in the past.'

'I'm not going to tell you anything, Ben - *Professor*. I'm going to show you.' Kyle reached slowly inside his tunic, and withdrew a small, cloth-wrapped rectangle, about the size of that bloody book Jason was so sucked into. Placing it gently down on the table, Kyle stepped back and gestured to the parcel. 'Open it.'

Keeping the gun pointed at Kyle, Benny reached down with one hand and flipped away the cloth, exposing what lay within.

She hadn't seen it in years. Not since she'd last held it, in a hidden shelter in the forests outside Spacefleet Academy. She was 16 then, and living with a handsome, funny cadet whose tortoises she'd once disturbed. She loved him, she'd told him as much. She'd said more, just not to his face, waiting until he was out of their concealed bivouac before picking up the box and speaking the words into it.

Watching the sentences recreated as green letters on the device's black screen, she'd thought that one day - sooner rather than later - he would come across them while reading everything he'd recorded, all his casual observations on the days. And in that moment he would know all her dreams of a life with him, the true depth of her love.

They'd been arrested before he had the chance.

Simon Kyle drew closer, gently touching Benny's shoulders, then, realising she was shaking, folding his arms around her.

'You didn't give it to them,' she breathed.

The gun slipped from her hands, clattering, forgotten, to the floor.

Spacefleet Academy Stockade, Earth, 2556

They'd both known it would be the last time they would see each other.

Simon had no idea how long he and Benny had been kept separated. Two days? Three? Sleep deprivation and calculated beatings had robbed him of all sense of time. He had let his interrogators have their jollies, his small flame of resistance burning brighter for giving them absolutely nothing in return. Finally he had been manhandled into a holding cell, his chest surging when the door was opened and Benny was tossed in after him.

Thirty minutes, they'd been told. Thirty minutes to say their goodbyes.

Benny could barely stand – Vice-Admiral Blake's men had worked her over thoroughly, more thoroughly than they had beaten Simon.

But then, in Blake's eyes, Benny was single-handedly responsible for all the ill-discipline in the Academy. If she hadn't flouted the rules for so long, becoming an anti-authority figurehead to the cadets, Blake wouldn't have half the trouble keeping them in line that he did.

Simon had helped her to the cot, run some water from the sink and bathed her face with a strip of rag torn from his fatigues. He'd wanted to kiss her, wanted it more than anything he'd ever yearned for, but her lips were swollen, puffed with bruising. He couldn't press his mouth to hers without causing her more pain, and Simon would never, ever hurt her, not even for that. So they'd held each other close with all the fierceness their battered bodies could endure, and they'd sworn that no matter what happened, they'd never let each other down.

When at last the door had clanked open, they had parted gently.

They weren't going to give the soldiers the satisfaction of having to rough them up any more in order to drag them apart. Holding her punished body as straight as she could manage, Benny had walked out of the cell under her own steam. She turned just enough to mouth Simon a final farewell, the same words she'd first said to him lying on a pile of stolen bedding in a dead-wood shelter.

And with that, Bernice Summerfield was gone from Simon Kyle's life.

Spacefleet was going to make an example of them both. That much had been obvious when their captors had marched them both back to the Academy in the middle of afternoon drill practice. Row upon row, column upon column of recruits stood to attention, only their eyes

permitted to move as the prisoners were hauled past them, beaten and restrained. The message from the brass had been clear – drill wasn't the only lesson being taught that afternoon.

There'd be no trial. Deep down, Simon knew this would end in front of a firing squad, probably a firing squad organised to take place in front of an audience. The war was chewing up soldiers faster than Spacefleet could train them – the brass couldn't afford even one trooper to go AWOL. The directive from the top was that desertion didn't only have to be put down, it had to be seen to be put down. So when the cell door opened again, Simon Kyle had already made his peace. He knew what to expect.

The superannuated, brittle figure standing alone in the doorway wasn't even close. He wore Spacefleet fatigues, but Simon could see no name tag, no indicators of rank. The man's very bearing, however, spoke loud and clear: officer. And an old officer in Spacefleet was a rarity: so few made it past the first five or ten years. Markings or not, then, the man's very existence told Simon all he needed to know about him. Whoever he was, he was intelligent, cunning, powerful.

A thickly muscled sergeant with a metal plate bolted into his skull stepped in behind the mystery man. Simon had never seen him on the base before either. For some reason the pair had to have been brought in specially – he and Benny had obviously attracted attention from on high. Clanking a chair onto the grey concrete floor, the sergeant retreated, sealing Simon in the cell with the old man.

The officer sat down, a small smile ghosting across his features as the chair took the weight of his aged frame.

'We're very disappointed in you, Mister Kyle.' The man's voice was like riffling through pages of an ancient book, breathy and dusty. 'We had high hopes for you and Cadet Summerfield.'

Simon regarded him calmly, determined that while his gaze might be squinted through half-closed, swollen eyes it would still show strength.

If that was Simon's intention, however, his interviewer acknowledged none of it. 'I have a problem, Mister Kyle. I should like you to help me with it. Should you feel so inclined.'

'You want my help, let Bernice go.'

'Yes, well it's interesting that you should bring that up,' the officer wheezed. 'Letting Cadet Summerfield go in return for your compliance was precisely what I had in mind.' He shifted in his chair, leaning closer in to Simon, a waft of spiced aftershave arriving a second later. 'You are aware that young Bernice is the daughter of Admiral Isaac Summerfield?' Simon betrayed no reaction one way or the other. 'Of course you are. And you will be similarly aware that Admiral Summerfield is... was a rather gifted tactician. Now, we have been

keeping a very special eye on Bernice. It is by no means certain that such strategic acumen as her father possessed would have been passed down to the next generation, but if the possibility exists... well then, Admiral Summerfield's daughter would be of immense value to the war effort, wouldn't you agree?'

'Get to the point,' Simon responded wearily.

The officer emitted a dessicated laugh. 'Yes, yes, indeed. I'm well aware you have somewhere more important to go.' He coughed twice, high and dry. 'Summerfield's decision to run away and live out in the woods was initially rather troubling to us. To lose our grip on such an asset... well, it was more than a little clumsy on our part. Yet it did prove rather a valuable point to my superiors. You see, Cadet Summerfield eluded capture for so long, even when so many more experienced soldiers had been dispatched to retrieve her... it was all the evidence my superiors required that she has inherited some, if not all of her father's talents.'

Simon sneered. 'That or your search parties aren't all they're cracked up to be.'

'Oh, make no mistake, Mr Kyle, we are fully aware that Cadet Summerfield derives something akin to hero worship amongst the men. We know that many of her fellow cadets admire her for her little adventure in the wilderness. Some, like yourself, have even ended up helping her to stay hidden. It would appear that young Bernice is not merely tactically astute, but also capable of engendering deep loyalty in her fellows, eh?' The officer snorted greenly. 'Yes, my superiors truly believe that, now she has been recaptured, Bernice will be a fine weapon in our diminishing arsenal.'

'Unfortunately, in my opinion, Bernice is far too wilful to ever allow us to return her to the fold. Were we to try, she would surely take the first opportunity to desert, and in all likelihood that would be the last we would see of her. That is why we have no choice but to execute you both forthwith.'

Considering the sheer degree of physical punishment Simon had suffered, he still moved so quickly the officer hadn't time to flinch.

Powering up from his bunk, he seized the officer by the throat.

Sinking his thumbs into the flaccid neck, Simon snarled into his tormentor's face... only to see laughter in the old man's bulging eyes.

His vision exploded as the metal-headed sergeant cracked him across the back of the head with his daystick. Simon collapsed to the cell floor, face scraping into the rough concrete, a scabbed cut reopening over his eyes. Vast hands seized him and hurled him back to the bunk.

The officer pulled himself upright, stretching his neck out from his collar. 'Yes, Mr Kyle, being as how we can make no further use of your

girlfriend, she is due in front of the firing squad in –’ he made great show of consulting a chunky chronometer on his left wrist, ‘– approximately nine minutes. She will serve as an object lesson to all those considering desertion.

‘There is, however, an alternative.’

Kyle mopped blood from his eyes with his fingertips. ‘I’m listening.’

The officer set his chair back on its feet, and sat himself back down.

‘It is plain that the life Summerfield found outside Spacefleet was far more attractive to her than anything we could possibly offer her. If she is to be of any use to us in the future, that balance must swing in the other direction. Whatever joys, whatever delights she experienced during her sojourn into the outside world, she must come to realise that they were not only fleeting, but also desperately unattractive.

‘Now, what would you say was the most important thing to Bernice, out there in the forest?’

Simon opened his mouth to speak, thought about what he was going to say, then closed it again.

‘Oh, come now. Either you’re being falsely modest or you’re immensely stupid, and I refuse to believe the latter.’ The officer smirked. ‘It’s you, my dear boy. That rather emotive display of affection you shared together just now is surely all the proof you require.

‘Spacefleet is an accomplished military organisation, Mister Kyle, but the one thing we cannot defeat entirely is an idealist. Not unless we can remove the ideal. That would be you. Cadet Summerfield loves you, Mister Kyle, to the exclusion of all others. We want her to love us. Were she to come to believe that you had acted against her in some way, it would break her spirit. We would be there to pick up the pieces, to convince her that her true place in life is with us, as the dedicated and gifted soldier she is most surely destined to become.

‘Ultimately, Mister Kyle, it boils down to this: how much do you love her?’

‘I told them about the diary. Told them but didn’t give it up. I said it had been lost in the river when we ran from the soldiers. They weren’t happy, but it was enough for them to work with.’

‘They said you gave it to them.’

‘Did they show it to you?’ He shrugged. ‘Or did you just believe them when they said that they had it?’

Benny lay on her back, staring at the ceiling, as if expecting that to come down on her next. Simon watched her from his chair. His elbows rested on his knees, his whole posture slumped. Part of him had hoped that revealing the secret he’d kept bottled up for so long would give him back some of what he’d lost all those years ago. In the

end, it had deflated him, diminished him.

‘They sent me as far away from you as they could manage. Told me you’d swallowed the story whole. All that independence, all that fire, snuffed out just like they’d wanted. You were alive, Benny, but the girl I’d fallen for was as good as dead.’

He paused, giving Benny the opportunity to say something. She lay there, her eyes squeezed tight, trying to force the tears back in, failing. They ran down her cheeks, dropping to soak into the sheets.

‘I served with the fleet for fifteen years out there, and every promotion I received, people still thought I was being rewarded for selling you out. It didn’t matter what I tried to tell them. By the time I sorted myself out and made some kind of reputation, a decade and a half had gone by and you were missing, presumed gone for good.

‘I was on Heaven...’ said Benny.

‘Yes. I found that out from Ivo. He sorted a lot of this out for me. Time came when I knew I had to go back for the diary, so I waited until I had some leave, went back and dug it up. It was a symbol for me by then, you see? It was proof. They’d forced me to play their game but they’d never completely beaten me. Just like I hoped they’d never completely beaten you.’

‘Did you... did you read it?’ Kyle could see Benny was doing everything in her power to hold herself together, straining not to fly into thousands of pieces.

‘Yes.’

‘Even...?’

‘Yes.’

She sobbed, loud and long, howled in pain. Simon crossed the room, held her while grief ripped through defences she’d spent twenty years building. Twenty years of cynicism and mistrust, blasted away in seconds. And in the wreckage cowered Bernice Summerfield, lost, wounded, screaming, sixteen years old with her heart in pieces.

‘Tell me about Ivo,’ she said, sometime later.

‘He’d almost given up looking for you after the disaster on Heaven. He’d been working as a technician on various freighters across the spiral rim, then fell into support work for Spacefleet. That’s where he heard about me.’

Simon lay back on the bed, Benny’s head on his chest, smearing his uniform with mascara trails. She clung to him like a lifebelt. He let her.

‘I’d been fighting Daleks out at Yerwa Nova. My ship had taken a hammering, the captain and first officer were dead. I turned it around. Took command, routed the tinpots, saved the ship. It made the newsfeeds clear across the quadrant, gave Spacefleet’s spin doctors

something to hang their hats on. And it proved a point, gave people reason to think that I might have earned my promotions like any other officer.

‘Ivo remembered what you’d told him about me. He had no other leads to work with, so when my name made the news he sought me out. I had no idea where you were, told him that, but I found myself opening up to him anyway. I don’t know what it was – maybe that he knew what I was supposed to have done to you and still didn’t judge me. He just had this way of making you...’

‘Spill your guts?’

Simon laughed. ‘Yes. Exactly. I’d never told anyone about what happened in that interrogation room. What could I say that anyone would believe? And there I was, giving it all up to a total stranger. I even showed him the diary.

‘And so we became friends. Best friends. It was funny to think of it, but we both had so much in common.’ Simon chuckled. ‘We’d both lost you, for a start. I was married by then, to an archaeologist.’

Benny lifted her head from his chest, stared at him. ‘Ivo kept an eye on her while I was on campaign. When my daughter was born, my wife and I made Ivo her godfather. He was the most loyal, kind person I’ve ever met, I couldn’t think of a better example for my little girl to follow.

‘Meanwhile I fed him all the bits of information I could find concerning your whereabouts, and got him access to military resources. But you were always too far ahead of him. He’d get to your last known position and you were already long gone. It was an impossible trail – half the sightings contradicted each other or just didn’t make sense.’

Benny sat bolt upright. ‘You set this up, didn’t you? The dig, the invitation to get me here, all of it.’

Simon sighed. ‘You need to understand how long Ivo had been trying to find you. We saw you singing on the tri-D. Spacefleet has always kept well out of the way of the Braxiatel Collection – respecting your privacy and all that. And then there you are, you, not a day older, and yelling at us to come take notice.’

‘I thought...’ said Benny, but it didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

‘I didn’t think...’ Again the words failed her. Simon took her hand kindly.

‘When I heard about the discovery the survey teams had made it was just so obvious what we had to do. Ivo had spent his life five steps behind you. Now we could put him one step in front. If he knew where you were going to be and when, he could be waiting when you got here. All I had to do was pull a few strings to make sure you were the expert who got invited to examine the site—’

‘You set a sodding trap for me.’

‘We did, yes.’

‘And now some bloodthirsty maniac’s hijacked it!’ Benny raged.

‘Why didn’t you just tell me Ivo had been murdered as soon as I landed?’

Simon held up his hands. ‘Because by the time you’d arrived I’d seen Ivo attack his killer on the simulation. For him to do that he had to have believed you were the real target. If we kept it quiet that Ivo was murdered, there was a chance the killer might think he’d got away with it and make a move on you at the funeral. And if he did, I was going to be ready. That’s why I was hanging around at the wake with all the soldiers.’

‘You really were going to use me as bait,’ Benny gaped.

‘Just stop. Please.’ Kyle drew in a deep breath. ‘We could go round and round with this all night. Yes, it was wrong, yes it was an abuse of my position, but if it meant we could catch Ivo’s killer...’

Benny felt her flush of anger fading. Slightly. ‘Ivo could have just called me and asked me to come.’

‘No, he couldn’t. Partly because he couldn’t tell you the real reason why he needed you, so there was no guarantee you’d come. I mean, you knew him for a couple of days fifty years ago. Would a vid-call asking you to drop by for old times’ sake have been enough to drag you halfway across the system?’

Benny opened her mouth to protest. But if she were honest with herself, it probably wouldn’t. She’d so nearly not even come for the funeral. ‘You said “partly”.’

Kyle sighed. ‘I made sure Ivo thought it was best to bring you here. I wanted to see you.’ He stopped, took hold of Benny’s hands. ‘When I gave you up all those years ago, I never thought I’d see you again. I knew you’d never agree to see me, not believing what you did. The plan to lure you here was as much for my sake as for Ivo’s, I wanted you to know how much –’

‘Stop.’ Benny pulled her hands out from Simon’s. ‘I can’t –’

‘Benny, I’m not asking you to. It took me years to get over you. Even when I thought you were out of my system, there was still something there. I married an archaeologist, for God’s sake.’ He laughed. ‘But I did get over you, eventually. I’m not here to declare undying love, just to set things straight. You deserve to be happy, Benny, and I hurt you. For years. I want to change that. Anything I can do to make your life happier... And if we can be friends afterwards, so much the better.’

Benny hugged herself. He was right. One act of betrayal all those years ago had blighted every relationship since. There hadn’t been a single man she’d ever been able to trust completely. Even poor Jason –

if she could only admit it to herself, he never let her down. Well, rarely. But no matter what he did, she was always finding reason to suspect him of something. She doubted his fidelity, his honesty, his motives. She always believed the worst of him.

Just as she'd believed the worst of Simon, when ultimately there was nothing to support the brass's claims that he'd given her up.

She'd just taken their word for it, blindly, unquestioningly.

For so long she'd blamed Simon's betrayal for her inability to trust men. But if she had been capable of trusting him in the first place, she'd never have believed he'd sold her out. The brass had identified a weakness in her and exploited it.

All those years of hurt and failure that she'd blamed on Simon.

They were all her own fault.

Jason felt like he'd been flushed through with sulphuric acid. That was the down side. The up side was that his hangover was completely gone. Caroline hadn't struck him as the boy-scout type, but she'd certainly been prepared, forcing a pair of Nocohol tabs into his hand when he'd finally admitted defeat.

So here he was, top investigator Jason Kane, clean-shaven, sober, socks with clocks and all that, ready to pay a visit on a woman worth a million dollars. Well, she was to him, at least. Okay, so these days a million dollars would barely cover his vodka consumption from the previous evening, but that, he told himself, was hardly the point.

Yup, no putting it off any longer, he thought. Time to sort it out with Benny.

Jason arrived at Benny's room just in time to see Admiral Kyle leaving. What the bugging hell was he doing coming out of her room at the crack of dawn? Trotting down the corridor, Jason paused at Benny's door, fist raised to knock. A noise wafted from under the steel – sobbing.

Jason allowed his hand – still in a fist – to drop to his side, and took off after Kyle.

He caught up with him on the way to the vehicle pool, hitting the Admiral at a run and slamming him face first into the side of an ATV.

Clasping a hand around Kyle's wrist, he wrenched one arm up behind his back, pinning the old soldier to the vehicle.

'All right, Rambo. I've given you more than the benefit of the doubt, considering what you did to Benny at the Academy. But if you think you can keep on hurting her I'll –'

Looking back on it, Jason still couldn't believe an old man could move that fast. One second he had Kyle pinned helpless to a truck, the next there was a wrinkly hand around his neck, forcing him hard into the dirt. Before Jason could recover, Kyle's boot was on his throat, pressing hard enough to impede his breathing.

'May I be completely honest with you, Mr Kane?' Jason gurgled, fingers scrabbling to pry the foot from his neck. 'You're a slob, a womaniser, a pornographer and, if my sources are to be believed, a common criminal. I cannot conceive of a universe in which you can be, or ever will be, good enough to occupy the same planet as Bernice Summerfield, let alone marry her. Now Bernice may be slightly confused about your worth but, make no mistake, I am not. If the opportunity arises for me to prove to her that her life is better without you, I will do so without thinking twice. Am I making myself heard here, Mr Kane?'

Jason croaked, his struggles diminishing.

‘Good. Then I suggest you be very sure you don’t put a foot wrong in future.’

Kyle relaxed the pressure of his boot, and stalked away to the vehicle pool. Jason remained in the dirt, fingering his tender neck. A shadow fell across him.

‘So his is bigger, then?’ Caroline grinned.

‘Decryption complete.’

The chiming voice of the computer bolted Steven Nash from his sleep – he must have dozed off waiting for the programme to run its course. Repositioning his headset, which had slipped askew during his snooze, Nash hammered at the keyboard, resetting parameters and filters. Then settling back, he pressed the ‘play’ key.

Two minutes later, he was pounding down the corridor in search of Admiral Kyle.

Jason jammed the pole into the ground, imagining that the soft soil was Simon Kyle’s chest. Caroline had bantered amiably while she steered the ATV out to the jungle track, until she’d finally realised that Jason wasn’t playing. By the time they arrived, the silence was thicker than a drunk’s tongue. Thrusting through the jungle, they’d reached the clearing where Ivo died and without a word, Jason had trudged off on his own with half the recording devices. Caroline simply raised her eyes to heaven and told him she was off to take scans at the foot of the cliff.

Working alone it took almost an hour for Jason to set up the data recorders. By the time he’d reached the cliff edge, sweat was running freely from his forehead, behind his shades and into his eyes. Taking them off, he wiped the wetness away, forced to squint until he had the glasses back in position. Which is when he spotted it.

The last time he’d been out in the clearing had been to watch the holo-sim of Ivo’s death. The whole group had stood facing the edge of the cliff as the Ivo construct was heaved out into space. The first time he’d had a proper look at the clearing itself was on the holo-sim generated from the original forensic scans, which had been taken shortly after Ivo’s death.

The scans had shown that the killer – identified by his Spacefleet issue boot-prints – had run to a boulder by the treeline then vanished.

So where had the boulder gone?

Reaching into his pocket, Jason toggled the control that activated the data-gatherers, then walked towards the space where the boulder ought to be. He had to be sure he wasn’t just mistaken. There were plenty of rocks in the clearing after all – Benny had said something about a meteor strike. Jason used the holo-sim data on his computer

relay to judge his footsteps, stopping at precisely the point where the rock should have been. Nope, definitely gone.

His first thought was that someone had moved it – if the killer had stood on the rock before a matter transporter zapped him away, the rock would bear micro-molecular signs that could help track the source of the beam. Maybe the killer came back and destroyed the rock to prevent anyone doing that. He sank to his haunches. No, that wasn't it. The grass where the boulder should have been – flattened as it was – was still alive. If the rock had been there for a long time, say ever since it broke off from a detonating meteor, all the grass under it would be dead. Hell, there'd probably be no grass at all, just a boulder-shaped indent in plain dirt. But if the boulder had only been there a short time, and didn't weigh as much as you'd think...

Jason rose from his crouch, grinning like an idiot. No wonder they hadn't been able to work out how the killer had got out of the clearing so quickly.

The killer hadn't got out of the clearing at all.

* * *

The hammering at Benny's door snapped her from sleep – she hadn't even realised she'd nodded off. In reality, the long night of truth and consequences with Simon had left her exhausted, and she'd collapsed into a coma moments after Kyle had left. She glanced at her watch: she'd only been asleep three-quarters of an hour. Stumbling to the door, she pulled it open. Simon Kyle stood with a pair of soldiers – she recognised one as the communications officer – a grim look on his face.

'What's wrong? What's happened?'

'Bernice, I'm going to need you to come with us.'

'What for?'

'Please, Bernice. Don't make this any more difficult.'

A small motion in her peripheral vision alerted Benny to one of the soldiers releasing the catch on his holster. 'I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on, Simon.'

Kyle held her gaze. 'There's something you have to see.'

Pushing past her – and leaving the guards stony-faced at the door – Kyle led Bernice to the desk. Sitting her down, he engaged the room's tri-D, and gently slipped a data-crystal into the reader. The screen fizzed into life.

She may have had almost no sleep in the last 36 hours, and the message that Lieutenant Nash had spent all night reconstructing was overlaid with static, but there was no mistaking whose head and shoulders Bernice was watching on the screen.

'It's me. I've had a quick shufti at the artefacts and they're worth a

bloody fortune! Not sure what you'll want to do with them – keep them for the Collection or sell them on. Up to you.

Had to get rid of that ignorant cow of an archaeologist, and Kyle's all over me like a rash so I've got to be careful, but if you want to start lining up buyers I've pinched a couple of samples as tasters. Got one ready and waiting, so if you want to meet and pick it up, signal me back, usual way!

Kyle flicked off the recording. 'Bernice. What have you done with Professor Rugrien?'

'Caroline! Caroline! I've cracked it!'

Jason ran across the field, seizing the stunned Captain around the waist. 'Easy, tiger,' she smiled. 'Cracked what? Your head on a rock?'

'I know how the killer did it. I know how he got past you after killing Ivo.'

Instantly she was serious, her smile evaporating. 'How? Where did he go?'

'Come and see.'

Jason hauled her to the spot where the boulder should have been.

'You see?'

The smile was creeping back. 'Would you be hugely offended if I said no?'

Holding up one finger in the universal 'hold on a minute' gesture, Jason pulled the small military computer relay from his pocket and launched the voice-activated processor.

'Analyse: from data currently available, what are the chances that Suspect One is a shapeshifter?'

'Likelihood of Suspect One possessing metamorphic capability, 98.798 per cent,' the computer crackled.

'You see? The killer would have heard you coming, realised he couldn't get away in time and just blended in. He would have been sitting there looking like a rock the whole time while you and the forensics guys worked the scene.'

'Then just slipped away when the fuss had died down. Jason, you're brilliant!'

Flinging her arms around him, Caroline Dadd snogged him fiercely.

'You've got to look at the evidence, Bernice. Rugrien's missing, I've got two guards who admit to allowing you access to the dig in the middle of the night, and this message is virtually a confession...'

'It's a fit-up, Simon!' Benny raged. Kyle's men were rifling through her possessions, swiftly turning her neatly maintained room into a bomb site. She winced as a bottle of perfume shattered. 'You know, like that time everyone thought you'd sold me out to Spacefleet.'

Simon put his hand on Benny's shoulders. 'Difference is I don't believe you did it.'

Benny felt shame colouring her cheeks. 'So why are you doing this?' 'Duty,' Simon said uncomfortably. 'I have to follow procedures, even if I don't necessarily agree with them. You're not a killer, Benny, or a thief. I may not be able to prove it, but I do know it.'

'Thank you, Simon.'

'Admiral Kyle!' One of the searchers had managed to lever a panel from the inside of Benny's wardrobe and extracted a small, cloth bag.

Holding it open for everyone to see, he revealed it contained an ancient parchment scroll.

'I'm sorry, Benny,' Kyle declared. 'I'm going to have to confine you to quarters until this is cleared up.'

'You what? You just said you didn't believe a word of it!'

'All the same, my duty as commanding officer of this base is clear. Look at it this way. if someone's trying to frame you, the safest place is under guard.'

'Safest for who, Simon?' Benny bellowed. 'If you lock me up you've given whoever's done this exactly what they want!'

'It's just until we can clear your name. All we have to do is prove the message was doctored somehow and you're in the clear. Just stay here until then.'

'Oh sod off, Simon.'

A figure appeared in the doorway, the guard falling back instantly to allow clear passage. 'You called me. Admiral?'

Kyle turned to face the new arrival. 'Ah yes. I need you to hold off on your analysis for a while. I've got a message I need you to look at, run a few tests.'

Caroline Dadd held out a hand to receive the data crystal. 'Yes, sir. I'll start right away.'

Jason relaxed into the kiss, revelling in its warmth and the firm softness of Caroline's body against his. His pleasure lasted only an instant. An image of Benny drifted behind his eyelids with that look on her face – the 'I knew it, and now you're going to know it, buster,' look. Gently, he tried to push himself away.

And he couldn't.

Caroline's tongue swirled around the inside of his mouth, behind his teeth and across the surface of his own tongue, questing forcefully. Twisting.

Lengthening.

Jason's eyes widened in shock and terror as Caroline's tongue encircled his, tightening around it like a tentacle, squeezing. He gagged, choking on the sheer volume of matter in his mouth, as Caroline's tongue tugged. Once. Twice.

There was a wet rip. Jason screamed, blood spraying Caroline's

face. She stepped back, a limp, red piece of meat gripped in a grotesque appendage that dangled from her mouth to the length of her waist. A casual flick of the tentacle and Jason's tongue flew into the undergrowth. The nightmare organ shrank back into Caroline's mouth, reverting to a normal tongue. Jason clasped his hands to his mouth, trying to stem the flood of gore.

'Sorry, lover,' Caroline said, licking her lips. 'I just can't trust you not to kiss and tell.' She closed the distance between them again. A flash of steel in her hand preceded a hot, sharp pain in Jason's gut.

Still holding his mouth, he looked down to see her opening him up with a combat knife.

'Now be a good boy and have a little lie down for me.' Grasping Jason's collar in her slim hand, Caroline heaved him off his feet and tossed him after his tongue. Not even waiting to see where he fell, the thing purporting to be Caroline Dadd sauntered off into the jungle.

Simon Kyle had seen flashes of it, back when they were living under a pile of branches in the forest: a casual comment here, a look there, small signs that Bernice Summerfield had the potential to cause monumental trouble in his life. Back then, of course, when he was in love with her, he was prepared to let it go.

Now? Now, Bernice was in her room under armed guard, on suspicion of theft and murder. Meanwhile her reprobate ex-husband – and possible accomplice – was still at large, and a murderer was stalking around the base with who knew what intentions.

Now, Simon Kyle was beginning to wonder if he hadn't had a lucky escape getting caught by Spacefleet.

'Admiral Kyle.' Caroline Dadd stood hesitantly in the doorway.

'Well, where is he?' Kyle barked.

'I don't know, Admiral,' said Caroline Dadd. 'We were supposed to head out to the murder site this morning but he vid-commed me to say he was still feeling unwell.'

'Unwell?' Kyle snapped.

'Yes, sir. We, uh, tied one on last night and–'

Kyle stepped up close to Dadd. Reflexively, Caroline found herself stepping back. 'When all this is wrapped up, Captain, you and I are going to have a couple of words about your professional conduct. "Court" and "Martial". Right now I want you to find Jason Kane, and quickly. I can't have him at liberty if there's even the smallest chance he's involved with what's going on with Professor Summerfield. And Captain?'

'Yes, sir?'

'Find that lemur woman, too.'

Vala walked across the outer compound, murmuring to herself. First Benny tells her that she won't help to redeem Ivo's name, then word gets out that she's been arrested for killing Professor Rugrien – how could Vala have been so wrong about someone? In the space of a single morning, all hope of her being able to marry the man she loved had burned away.

An ATV roared past, exploding from the track out into the jungle.

Startled, Vala just had time to jump clear before it clanked to a halt where she had been standing. A young squaddie leapt down from the cabin, showing no sign that he'd even noticed her.

'Excuse me!' Vala called. 'Excuse me! You nearly ran me down!'

The young private regarded her with undisguised fury then stalked towards her. As he approached, Vala shrank back from the volcanic

anger in his face, backing away fearfully. The soldier kept coming, until she was able to pick out the name on his jacket: Wearing, M.

‘You’re alive, aren’t you? What’s your problem?’ He leaned into Vala threateningly, glared at her. Then, seeing the expression of undiluted terror on the lemur’s face, Wearing broke the stare and trotted off to the main complex.

Vala remained rooted to the spot, chilled to the very core. When at last she regained the use of her legs, she ran full tilt towards the control centre.

She was certain that she’d just met Ivo’s killer.

‘He smells?’ Kyle repeated. This is absolutely the last thing I need right now, he thought. Deluded demi-lemurs.

‘Precisely,’ Vala exclaimed. ‘The soldier I saw driving the vehicle this morning bore Ivo’s scent. It’s quite distinctive.’

‘And this leads you to believe the soldier killed Ivo because...?’ Vala scampered around to Kyle’s side of the desk and started to tinker with his computer. ‘No, no, be my guest,’ Kyle muttered.

The computer screen flashed as Vala called up the holo-sim of Ivo’s death. She spooled through the recreation to the point she needed then paused it. ‘Look. When Ivo attacked his killer, he did it with his feet. He must have known whoever he was fighting was significantly stronger than him and that he was likely to lose the fight. So he struck with his feet first, used his scent glands to mark whoever it was that attacked him, just in case Ivo didn’t live long enough to identify him. Then, the killer could be clearly recognised by someone sensitive to Ivo’s smell.’

‘Someone like you.’

‘Indeed.’

‘All right,’ Kyle said. ‘Let’s find this soldier and ask him.’

Benny paced the confines of her room for the umpteenth time. It seemed a hell of a lot smaller now that she wasn’t permitted to leave it. Her foot caught a shoe, discarded on the floor after the search by Kyle’s trained monkeys, and it tumbled across the tiles. Drawing her boot back, she kicked the shoe at the door, unleashing her anger on the stray slingback.

It missed the soldier with the tray by millimetres.

‘Sorry!’ she exclaimed. ‘Breakfast time, is it?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ The soldier bore the tray to the table – the soldiers had swept everything on its surface to the floor – and laid it down with a tinkling of crockery and cutlery. Benny lifted the metal warming lid off the plate, freeing a cloud of fried smells into the room.

‘Looks like Kyle’s found me guilty, then.’ She prodded a crispy

something with her finger. 'Sentenced to death by cholesterol.'

Picking up a fork, she began to pick at what she imagined were eggs.

'Metal cutlery, though. I could threaten you with a knife, start digging my way out with the spoons, anything. Aren't you worried?'

'No, ma'am,' admitted Private Wearing, pushing his blaster into her face. 'Not in the slightest.'

Kyle's fingers danced over the keyboard. 'You're sure it was double-r?'

Vala clicked her tongue impatiently. 'Positive, Admiral. W-E-A-R-R-I-N-G.'

Kyle re-entered the data and hit the Enter key. The computer beeped

'Have you found him?'

'No.' Kyle replied. 'No, I haven't.'

Leaning over the Admiral's shoulder, Vala looked at the screen at the search results and squeaked softly. There it was in black and white.

'No record found.'

* * *

'So it's the old "shot while trying to escape" routine, is it?' Benny asked, placing the knife and fork back on the tray. 'Hence the cutlery.'

'Hence the cutlery,' Wearing smiled.

'You're really not big on the imagination bit of this, are you?'

'You'd be surprised.'

Benny rolled her eyes. 'Go on then. Surprise me.'

'After you're shot, the news will leak about how you murdered Professor Rugrien so that you could make off with the artefacts from the dig site. I imagine that if anyone dug deep enough they'd also find out about your arrangement with the Balgorans to make the archaeological find disappear so they can get on with building their tourist trap. And you the expert Spacefleet pulled so many strings for. Everybody loses!'

'Oh, don't stop. I love a good monologue.'

'I'm sure you do.' Wearing primed his blaster. 'But time marches on. If you want to put up a fight, go right ahead. It'll look better if there's been a struggle.'

'They're on to you, you know,' Benny said quickly. 'Ivo realised what you were up to and left us details. Kyle's probably on his way here now.'

Wearing smiled. 'Ivo knew nothing. The first idea he had was just before I killed him.'

'You what?'

‘You’d have loved the look on his face. One minute he’s looking at Captain Dadd, the next he’s looking at himself. Priceless.’

Benny gaped. ‘You’re a shapeshifter.’

‘He’d have been perfect – replace him to get close to you. But the real Captain Bloody Dadd turned up sooner than I’d thought. So, I’d killed him for nothing. Well, not nothing,’ Wearing smirked. ‘It was fun.’

‘Drop it.’ In the doorway, Kyle stood with a pair of soldiers Benny recognised from around the base as Houghton and Boardman. Both were aiming their rifles at Wearing.

‘Hello, Admiral,’ Wearing called out, without even turning around.

‘Perfect timing as ever. Do put the guns down. If you fire into this room, there’s a very good chance you’ll hit Professor Summerfield. And you wouldn’t want that, would you?’

‘Drop it. Now.’

Wearing looked straight at Benny, amusement painted across his features. ‘I don’t think he’s going to shoot, do you? All these years without you, he won’t risk your life now that he’s got you back.’

‘I won’t ask again,’ Kyle barked.

‘You do attract the strangest men, don’t you, Bernice? Do any of them actually care about you even a little bit? Take Jason.’ He giggled.

‘You should have seen him out in the jungle this morning with Captain Dadd. Tongues everywhere!’ Benny stared icily at him. ‘Yes,’ Wearing continued, ‘when she left him he was gutted, let me tell you.’

A subtle movement from the doorway drew Benny’s eyes. An energy blast rippled through the air. Benny’s first thought was that Simon had shot Wearing in the back, until she saw the soldier to Simon’s left fly back into the corridor. Houghton collapsed, his chest reduced to charred, shattered wreckage.

Wearing grinned – he was still facing Benny, but his elbow had crooked against the joint, bending 180 degrees in the wrong direction to train his pistol backwards at the door. Kyle and Boardman dived for cover, a second shot melting the wall behind them.

‘Double-jointed, Bernice,’ Wearing exulted. ‘Oh, and I’ve got eyes in the back of my head, too.’

‘Yeah, well you’re going to need them.’ Benny stabbed him in the face with the table knife, plunging it deep into an eye socket and on into his brain. Not stopping to see Wearing collapse, she barged past his falling body and into the corridor.

‘You okay?’ Simon asked.

‘Oh, super,’ Benny riposted. ‘Does this mean I’m off the hook?’

‘I’d say so.’

A crash from Benny's room drew their stares. Wearing was on his feet, pulling the knife out of his face. The wounded socket bulged and reconstituted.

'Open fire!' Kyle shouted. Boardman swept the room with energy beams, squeezing off shot after shot. The blasts chopped into Wearing, his flesh sizzling with the heat. Again, the shape-changer went down, flat on his back, thick smoke billowing from his wounds.

'Careful,' Benny breathed as Boardman edged forward, her rifle drawn up to her cheek, aim constantly trained on the fallen killer.

Circling around the body, she nudged the torso with her foot.

'Shit!' Boardman howled. A hand shot out from the side of Wearing's chest, seizing Boardman's ankle, and tugging her off her feet. Wearing lurched upright, his third arm maintaining its hold on the soldier's leg. Raising her off the ground with superhuman strength, he mashed her skull against the wall.

Just like he broke Ivo, Benny thought, repelled.

'That bloody hurt. Admiral!' Wearing screamed. His body exploded with appendages, a host of tentacles, arms, pincers flying out towards their targets.

'Run!' Benny yelled, firing wildly at the creature. Kyle – usually unused to taking orders – didn't need to be told twice, pelting down the corridor as he shouted into his wrist-comm.

'All personnel, red alert! Xenomorph loose in Accommodation Block Four. Heavy weapons teams report to my position immediately!'

Benny banged through the exterior door, Kyle a second behind her.

She pelted across the intervening space between the block and an ATV parked nearby. Sure she was under cover, she threw a glance back at the building. Through the open door, she could see Wearing – he had mutated into something like a sponge, from which extruded dozens of pseudopods, smashing their way down the building's main corridor. Soldiers arrived, circling the entrance to the block and taking up firing positions.

'What the hell is that?' Kyle barked, crouching next to Benny and aiming back at the doorway.

'It's a Mim,' Benny panted. 'I think. Never actually seen one before. Their home system's in Draconian space and they hardly ever leave it, so there's not much for anyone to go on. Still, spongy shapeshifter – reckon it fits the bill.'

'Can It be killed?'

The semicircle of troops opened fire, driving the alien back into the building. Roaring in pain, it slipped into one of the billets, out of the line of fire.

'Don't know,' Benny admitted.

'So what's it doing here?'

‘Do I look like the Mim-Master to you?’

‘Well, you were chatting to it!’

‘All I know is that it wants to kill me and so frame the Collection for colluding with the Balgoran tourist board.’ Benny stopped short. ‘I really was wrong about its lack of imagination.’

The soldiers began to move cautiously down the corridor after the Mim, covering each other in classic formation. Caroline Dadd and Vala scuttled from a building across the courtyard and dropped down next to Benny and Kyle. Gunfire and screaming echoed from inside the building. Somewhere a window smashed.

‘What’s going on?’ Dadd shouted.

‘Oh try and keep up!’ Benny groaned. ‘Shapeshifting alien decides to take Ivo’s place, mucks it up, pretends to be a soldier, frames me, tries to kill me, then goes berserk on base. How’s that?’

‘Concise,’ Caroline said, adjusting the settings on her gun. Another smashing window from the building, followed by more screams.

Simon raised his wrist comm. ‘This is Admiral Kyle, report.’

‘Admiral,’ the comm crackled. ‘It broke out of the Professor’s room, used the jungle outside to double-back to another window. It’s behind us and –’

Blaster fire and roaring shattered the transmission, then nothing.

More troops sprinted across the dirt approach to the block, covering the door.

‘Where’s the bloody heavy weapons team?’ Benny shouted.

‘There isn’t one,’ Dadd explained. ‘The base isn’t finished, heavy weapons haven’t arrived yet.’

Benny swore then turned sharply on the captain. ‘Where were you this morning?’ she asked abruptly. ‘Were you with Jason?’

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ Caroline growled. ‘Is this really the time?’

‘Were you with Jason?’

‘Listen!’ Caroline spat. ‘There’s nothing going on between us! God knows I’ve tried, but –’

‘You weren’t out in the woods?’ Benny asked.

‘Look, it’s fine if you don’t trust me, but you can trust him. Nothing happ–’

‘Shut up a minute!’ Benny’s mind raced. ‘Simon, you’ve got to get out to the clearing with some men – find Jason!’

‘I’m sure he can look after himself,’ Kyle answered brusquely.

‘Simon, please. The Mim said something about Jason being out there. It was taunting me. I think it’s hurt him.’

Kyle shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, Benny. I need to stay here and take care of this... thing.’

‘Please, Simon. Look, I know how to beat the Mim, but you’ve got to get your men out of here first.’ She looked deep into his eyes, willing

him to agree. 'If you want to make things up to me, take your men and find Jason. Please.'

Kyle returned her stare. Across the way the Mim had reached the door again to be greeted with a barrage of fire. A tentacle shot out, crashing into one of the troops. 'You know how to kill It?'

Benny nodded confidently. 'Yes, but it won't work if the place is crawling with soldiers. You have to go, pretend you're retreating.' A cry cut through the gunfire as another soldier fell. 'Not that you'll need to pretend too hard...'

Benny could see into Kyle's head: he was weighing the options, applying years of tactical nous to the situation. 'Tell me the plan,' he ordered.

An explosion ripped through the pre-fab hut behind them, tearing a wall out. 'There's no time, Simon. You want me to start trusting you again, fine, but you're going to have to trust me too.'

Simon's lips curled upwards. 'I always trusted you, Benny.'

'So go.'

Jumping from cover, Kyle sprinted to an ATV, yelling into his wrist-comm. 'Retreat! All personnel retreat to the vehicle bay immediately!'

Benny could see the soldiers falling back, firing wildly into the smoking structure, their shots doing little more than delay the Mim.

She turned to Vala and Caroline. 'You should go too, this doesn't need all of us.'

'Not a chance,' Caroline replied. 'If you've got a way to kill that thing I want to be sure you can do it.'

'I don't.'

'You don't what?'

'Have a way to kill it. I needed Simon to go and find Jason and he wouldn't unless he thought I could handle this.'

'Perfect,' Caroline grumbled. 'Then I'm definitely coming with you. If I let you get killed Kyle will have me flying sewage barges for the rest of my career.'

'Vala?'

The demi-lemur shrank away, shaking. 'I don't think I can. I'm -'

Benny looked at her gently. 'It's all right. Me, too. Look, find somewhere to hide. Stay there.' She waited until Vala had scuttled towards the vehicle pool and vanished from sight, then started to climb into the ATV. 'We've got to lead it away from Simon and his men.'

'Head to the dig site,' Caroline offered as she swung up after Benny.

Buckling herself in, Benny fired up the engine. Revving the throttle, she swung the vehicle around so it was broadside on to the Mim. Her face hardened as she watched it energetically mopping up Kyle's rearguard.

‘What are we waiting for?’ Caroline called out.

‘I’ve got to be sure it sees me. If it follows the wrong vehicle –’

‘We might get out of this alive.’

‘Maybe, but then the Mim’ll kill every soldier on the base, Jason will be dead and it’ll turn right around and come after us anyway.’

Caroline shrugged. ‘Fair enough.’

The Mim crashed clear of the building, still in its amorphous sponge-form. Whipping out a tentacle, it crashed a soldier into a wall, shattering his body. Another protuberance caught a mechanic around the throat, squeezing him until the head popped free.

‘Would it seem unprofessional if I changed my vote to running screaming into the trees and hiding in a ditch?’ Caroline quipped.

‘Too late – it’s seen us.’

Benny floored the accelerator, the Mim bounding after the ATV as it lurched into the trees. Crunching the gears, Benny spun the wheel into a turn, three of the transporter’s six wheels clearing the ground before crashing back to the dirt.

Caroline shot a glance at the rear-view mirror: the Mim was charging after them, gaining at an alarming rate. ‘Can you hold her steady?’

‘I could if you lot had bothered to finish plascreting the roads!’

‘Do what you can! I’m going to slow the bastard down!’

Caroline clicked a button on her door and the passenger side window whirred down. Winding one arm into the seatbelt to steady herself, she edged her head and shoulders outside the cab, taking aim with her blaster.

The Mim was gone.

‘Where is it?’ Caroline shouted.

Benny checked the mirror. ‘I can’t see!’

A shadow fell across Caroline’s face and she looked up. ‘Shit! It’s bloody flying!’

The Mim once again looked like Private Wearing, except for the broad, fleshy wings that had sprouted from its back. It swooped, hands outstretched to grab Caroline, screeching as it plummeted towards her. Caroline struggled to pull herself back in the cab, knowing that the Mim would be on her before she was under cover.

Benny braked. The ATV lurched to a halt, flinging Caroline further out of the window, but causing the Mim to misjudge its descent.

Diving too quickly to pull out, it ploughed headfirst into the jungle floor.

Ramming home the gearstick, Benny powered the truck back into motion, its front catching the Mim as it struggled to its feet.

Protruding talons from its fingers, the creature dug into the bonnet and clung on as the vehicle gathered speed – there was no way Benny

was going to be able to shake it off.

Leering at Benny with Wearing's eyes, it clawed its way up the front of the truck, closer and closer to the windscreen.

It wasn't aware that Benny was accelerating into the tree until the moment of impact.

The windscreen blew in, scattering glass over Benny, her body carried forward by the inertia to meet the glittering shower. The safety belt sliced into her chest, crushing the air from her lungs.

She had just about enough time to think 'Gotcha!' then blacked out.

The first of Benny's senses to return was her hearing, the whirring of the engine filling the cab. Then her smell – fumes. Fuel fumes.

It was the olfactory equivalent of having a bucket of freezing water tipped over her. Benny's eyes snapped open, instantly assessing her surroundings. Caroline was dangling half-in, half-out of the passenger window. The seatbelt she'd wound around her right arm to stop her falling clear had done its job, but the twisted and bloodied limb entwined in its length revealed there'd been a high price.

The impact with the tree had crushed the Mim at the waist, flattening everything below the pelvis against the trunk and leaving the torso lying face-down, flat and inert, on the truck's bonnet.

Remembering what had happened to Private Boardman, Benny resisted the urge to prod it and see if it was dead.

Caroline moaned. Benny started to unwind the harness from around the Captain's ruined arm.

'Did we get it?'

'Pinned it to the tree. Crushed it'

'Hoo-rah.'

Benny eased Caroline out of the cab. The pain in her chest took her breath away – definitely a broken rib or two – but Benny was still able to slip her head and shoulders under the woman's good arm and heft her clear of the wreckage. The explosion did the rest, searing air from the ATV's fiery demise punching them into the undergrowth off to the side of the track.

Benny spat dirt and rolled on her side. Squinting at the blaze, she tried to make out the Mim's body.

It was gone.

'Get up,' she exclaimed. 'Quickly!'

'What is it?' Caroline asked.

'The Mim. I don't think it's dead.'

'You said you pinned it to a tree!'

'And now it's gone.'

The pair hobbled back towards the fire, flames hot on their faces.

Benny was right. No body.

‘Got your gun?’ Caroline asked, checking her own blaster.

Benny’s hand moved to her holster. Empty. ‘Must have fallen out in the crash.’

‘Wait here,’ Caroline ordered. ‘I’ll circle around. It can’t have gone far in that state.’ I hope, she added silently to herself.

She padded around the blazing vehicle, eyes sweeping the foliage to the side of the track. There were no footprints or any other physical sign of which way the Mim had gone. She froze – something was rustling in the undergrowth just ahead of her. She took aim in the direction of the noise.

It was dragging itself along the ground – Caroline just caught a glimpse of its feet vanishing into the bushes.

She crept closer, the rustling from the wounded Mim helping to cover any noise from her approach. Reaching the spot where the feet had slipped into the greenery, she moved the leaves aside with her gun hand, her other, crippled arm useless at her side.

The Mim’s legs were slipping through the jungle bed.

With nothing above its waist.

The bushes next to Caroline exploded – she didn’t even have time to get a shot off before the bisected top half was upon her, talons tearing at her throat.

Kyle had made good time to the clearing – once they’d got close he’d instructed the driver to simply swerve off the track and plough through the undergrowth to get there, rather than force the men to get out and yomp it.

The ATV crashed through the trees, its armoured front section making light work of any wooded obstacles between it and its destination. By the time it shuddered to a halt in the clearing, the driver had shaved twenty minutes off the trip.

Kane had definitely been there, Kyle realised. Several data recorders were still in position atop their poles around the clearing, placed there and then forgotten. ‘Fan out!’ He called. ‘I want the clearing and all the surrounding vegetation swept. Two of you make for the bottom of the cliff, there might be something down there. Find Kane!’

The six remaining men and women from Jarghk Station moved off on their hunt. Kyle couldn’t conduct a proper search with six soldiers where normally he would need dozens. Forging into the undergrowth, he started looking himself, knowing deep down, as did his troops, that the chances of finding Kane alive were negligible.

* * *

Jason could swear he could hear Kyle. Too weak to move, he strained to listen again, unsure if he’d heard anything at all. No, there. That

crunching: footsteps, not too far away. And that was definitely Kyle's voice. Consciousness slipping away again, Jason smiled.

He was saved.

Benny heard Caroline screech, and set off at a run. She found Dadd's body a minute or so later. There was no sign of her head.

She picked up the dead captain's gun and backed away out of the trees. The weapon felt good in her hand – at least she had something to defend herself with – but Benny knew it wouldn't do more than slow the Mim down. What the hell did it take to kill that sodding thing?

'There you are. I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.'

Benny spun, gun up, to find herself sighting it at Jason. 'Keep back, you bastard,' she ordered.

The Jason-Mim walked slowly towards her, arms outstretched. 'Oh come on, babes. Give us a hug.'

The energy bolt caught the Mim in the face, searing off Jason's features. It collapsed backwards into the dirt, then stood right back up again, a new face forming over the old.

'There's something you should know about blasters, Benny,' said the Jason-Mim. 'They can't kill me.' One of its arms flashed out, morphing into a pseudopod that knocked away Benny's weapon. The Jason-face tore into a snarl. 'But they really bloody hurt!'

The flailing tentacle caught Benny a glancing blow to the head on the backswing, thumping her to the floor. She scrambled to regain her feet, failed, fell, and felt herself lifted up, helpless, the Mim's tentacle squeezed around her waist.

'You took a bit of a chance then, didn't you?' the Mim mocked.

'What if I'd really been Jason?'

Benny's head lolled on her shoulders. 'You'd have known not to call me "babes".'

'Important tip. Thanks.' The Mim's grip tightened. 'Right, let's get this over with, shall we?'

Something fell from the trees, landing on the Mim's back.

Whooping, the animal reached around and stuffed something into the Mim's mouth before leaping clear.

The Mim dropped Benny, reaching into its face to remove the object.

The detonation scattered bits of sponge across the jungle. Benny felt wet debris splatter into her face and small hands pulling her away. 'Vala?'

'Benny! Are you all right?'

'Aren't you supposed to be hiding?'

'If you die I'll never be able to get married, will I?'

Benny moaned. 'Not the best answer for my ego, but I'll take it. How did you get here so quickly?'

'Tree tops,' Vala smiled. 'We may have evolved, but there's some things lemurs don't forget'.

Benny looked at the shattered, writhing Mim. 'Bloody hell. I thought you lot all took vows of non-violence?'

Vala laughed chitteringly. 'Only Order initiates. I'm related to Ivo FitzIndri, they would never accept me!'

Benny chuckled, then winced as her ribs ground together loosely.

Even after death, Ivo was still finding ways to save her.

Something slithered across her face – a fragment of Mim. A fragment of Mim that was dragging itself back towards the main lump of its body. 'Shit. It's reforming.'

'A little late for that,' Vala said.

'No, it's reforming,' said Benny, pointing to the slowly reconstituting creature.

'What are we going to do?'

Benny pulled herself to her feet. 'We've not got long. Shooting it and blowing it up can't kill it... there's only one thing we can do.'

The earthclearer lurched forward, bearing down on the trees at the edge of the dig site. Benny activated the front-mounted molecular disruptors and the foliage in front of the vehicle vaporised.

Vala was jumping up and down on the spot. 'The Mim won't stand a chance! Brilliant, Benny!'

Bernice wedged the accelerator to the floor with a branch. 'We can't use it as a weapon,' she called out. 'It turns too slowly and the Mim's too fast. It'd just get out of the way.' She hopped from the driver's compartment and watched as the earthclearer rumbled quickly into the jungle, searing a path through the trees that would be visible from space. Benny grabbed Vala's arm and dragged her towards the tent covering the dig site. 'It's a distraction.'

She held open the tent flap so Vala could slip inside. The tomb was exactly as Benny had left it, the masonry hatch tilted off to one side to allow access to the stairway. 'Down you go,' she said.

Vala hesitated. 'Is there another way out down there?'

'Nope.'

'So you're trapping us underground?'

'Kind of. Now get.' She nudged the lemur down the flight of steps, glancing nervously out of the tent before following her.

Vala scampered down the passage, waiting at the double doors as Benny triggered the opening mechanism. Cold, dry air hissed out to meet them.

'Give me your hand.' Benny demanded. In the gloom, she felt Vala's

tiny paw slip into her palm. 'You're going to need to guide me. If we use torches in here, the Mim'll see us.'

Relying on her companion's superior night vision, Benny allowed herself to be led deeper and deeper into the library vaults. At last Vala stopped and they crouched quietly behind a book stack.

'What if the Mim changes into something with night sight like mine?' Vala asked.

'With a bit of luck it'll be too busy following the earthclearer to look in here.'

Time stretched as they crouched in the blackness. Benny dared not look at her watch for fear the light she'd need to see it would be seen by the Mim.

'Sounds like it bought it,' she hissed at last. 'It's probably miles away by now.'

A noise drifted down in the distance, a violent shredding. It's found the tent, Benny realised. 'Or maybe not,' she said.

Footsteps now, getting closer. Stopping. Silence, then a grinding rumble. A crack of breaking stone. What the hell is it doing, Benny asked herself.

Footsteps again. No torchlight. Either it can see in the dark or it's smart enough to know a torch will give it away. Can it see us?, she thought.

Pressing one finger up to her lips, Benny gestured for Vala to move, knowing the lemur would see the signal even if Benny couldn't. If they could double back, slip out, without it noticing...

Silently, Vala led the way back towards the entrance. Straining her ears for any sound of the Mim, Benny realised the only thing she could hear was her breath.

Gradually they neared the entrance, the blackness fading to grey, the small amount of light from the entrance giving her eyes something to react to. There was still no noise from the Mim, but the crawling sensation on her neck told Benny it was still down here somewhere.

Something smelled, a ripe, cloying odour that insinuated itself into her nose and throat. Benny fought the urge to gag. A nudge from Vala. Benny refocused her eyes. The demi-lemur was pointing at a blocky shape by the door: the sarcophagus was missing its lid. That scraping noise from earlier – the Mim must have thought she was hiding in the stone coffin and prised the top off. Drawing closer, Benny's vision adjusted to see fragments of the shattered cover littering the floor. In her hand, Vala's paw clenched. She had to strain to see, but at last Benny recognised the body in the stone hollow.

Professor Rugrien. And from the smell, she'd been there a while.

Benny fought down her revulsion, both at the sight and at her own shame. Just yesterday, she'd thought Rugrien had unethically opened

the casket for an early look inside. But the Mim must have been masquerading as the archaeologist for weeks. That'd explain why Rugrien didn't know Benny had co-written that book – it had seen the copy in Rugrien's jacket and remembered it, but never actually opened the cover.

Vala tugged at Benny's arm, urging her towards the way out. Benny turned in the direction of the doors, only for the light to die rather than increase. Something was blocking the way. And chuckling.

'Run!' Benny yelled. The pair scattered, the Mim charging in pursuit. As she sprinted into the darkness, Benny heard a muffled yelp from behind her. Vala. Hands outstretched into the blackness, Benny ran on, slamming hard into one obstruction, then another. The crash of overturned shelves and stacks behind her suggested the Mim was having similar luck.

Bright whiteness stabbed into the chamber. Shouting, someone calling her name.

'Benny, this way!'

Simon.

She couldn't head straight to the lights, the Mim would expect it.

Zig-zagging through the shadows of the questing lamp beams, she staggered her run, praying it would be enough to confuse her pursuer.

The pulsing of blaster repeaters filled the aeons-old air, hammering Benny's ears. Staggering into the light, she could see that the Mim had reached the soldiers ahead of her, three of them pinning it back with gunfire while two more carried an inert Vala out through the passageway.

The Mim picked up a chunk of sarcophagus lid and heaved it at its attackers. Two were knocked down, one kept firing. But the soldier's efforts alone weren't enough. The Mim closed the distance between them and fired out a tentacle, flattening him, before turning its attention to the dazed couple on the ground.

Kyle hurried towards her. 'Benny, quickly!'

'Where's Jason?'

'He's alive. The medics have got him! Now move!'

The Mim had finished with the soldiers, and started to close in on her.

Benny stuck out a hand. 'Give me your gun!'

'Benny, go!' Kyle shouted, taking aim at the marauding shapeshifter. 'I'll hold it off.'

'I'm not going to let you... oh, just give it to me!' Benny shouted, snatching the pistol from his grip.

The Mim hurtled closer, roaring in pain and anger. Benny aimed and fired.

The energy bolt missed by several feet, sizzling over the Mim's

head. The creature howled in triumph...

...and the air above it exploded into flames. Burning oil from the ancient reading lamps showered down into the room. Flaming gobs of fuel rained onto the bookshelves and the Mim alike, the paper and the alien's dry, spongy flesh going up like kindling.

'Let's see if it can re-form from ashes,' Benny muttered, ushering Kyle to the door. In seconds, they were clear. Benny pushed the closing mechanism and the portals started to swing closed.

The Mim raged, a walking inferno, lashing out tendrils and limbs in agony as it fought to get to Benny. It was just metres away when the doors came together with a crash, sealing the tomb so tightly that not even the air could get out.

Benny slumped against the cool brick of the passage wall.

Hammering thundered out from the far side of the door, fast, urgent, then slower and more feeble, until finally it stopped.

Kyle stooped, hands on his knees, chest heaving. 'You've just set fire to the most important dig in this planet's history,' he panted.

'Yeah. And now we're going to cover the whole thing in plasticrete and make sure that thing really is stuck in there.'

'What sort of bloody archaeologist are you?'

'The bloody-glad-to-be-alive sort,' Benny smiled. 'Anyway, look on the bright side. Now you get your training camp, the locals get their theme park and I get to do something I should have done a long time ago.'

Benny kept her head bowed, incense and hooting billowing around it. When at last the sound died, she allowed the Abbot to touch her once, lightly on the forehead, then rose from her knees to stand upright for the first time in over an hour. Her knees and back popped like breakfast cereal, but she only had herself to blame for that. If she'd done this when she was 22 and supple – like she should have – it wouldn't have been a problem. She had hated goodbyes back then, but she also knew that she'd run away from Ivo because she hated the thought of having someone else travel with her. Just the thought of having to share, to explain, to have anyone really know her... It had hit her with a terror so vivid she could feel it even now.

She'd grown up a bit since then. She wasn't running away any more.

'Bernice Surprise Summerfield,' intoned the Abbot, a greying demi-lemur who looked old enough to have triggered the Big Bang, 'you have brought to justice the killer of Ivo FitzIndri. For this, the Order of the Lost Lemuroidea recognises you as worthy, and acknowledges the vow made to you by Brother Ivo. Go in peace and lead a worthy life that those whose paths cross yours may find themselves enriched and elevated by having known you.'

'Thank you,' she murmured, turning to face the congregation. And in front of the assembled Order and friends old and new. Benny began to cry.

Stepping from the temple, and into the retina-searing light. Benny realised she'd left her sunglasses inside. She could picture them clearly, sitting on the table in the preparation area where the monks had allowed her to change. She'd been so glad to get out of the scratchy, musky-smelling ceremonial robes provided by the Order and back into her own clothes that she'd simply forgotten to pick them up.

Turning on her heel, she walked straight into Sarah Kiyomoto.

Literally – her foot cracked painfully into the metal frame of Sarah's wheelchair. The impact jolted through the chair and up Nicky's arms, the young girl gripping the chair's handles as she pushed her mother out of the building.

'Oh bloody hell. I'm sorry!' Benny fussed.

'Forget it,' Nicky said. 'She's not in.'

Benny stared into Sarah's eyes. The lights were on, but... She looked up again to address Nicky. 'Are you off now?'

'Tomorrow morning. Think we've been on Balgoris long enough, don't you?'

'Thanks for staying,' Benny said. 'It meant a lot that Sarah could see

the ceremony.'

'If she did see it,' Nicky answered.

'Yeah. If she did,' Benny agreed. 'Do you think you could?'

'No problem,' Nicky said. 'I'll tell her.'

'Right. Suppose you'll want to be getting off, then. Pack up and stuff.'

'Suppose. Early flight out. You know what the military are like.'

'The military?' Benny said, puzzled.

'That friend of yours, the pilot,' Nicky explained. 'Fancies himself, twitchy eye.'

'Dave Vyshinsky,' Benny provided.

'That's him. His dropship's headed back our way and he offered us a lift.' Nicky smirked, and for an instant Benny saw Sarah in the young woman's unlined face. 'Know exactly what he's after. Dirty old git.'

Benny laughed. 'You want to look out for his co-pilot, then. Conner. More your type.'

'Thanks for the tip,' Nicky said. 'Be seeing you.'

'I hope so. I mean that.'

'I know.'

Benny watched Nicky push the chair towards their hire car and start to transfer Sarah inside. Bloody hell, she thought, all that effort to get her into a car, how's the daft old bat going to cope in a dropship with Dave Vyshinsky doing the driving?

And remembering the whoops of excitement Sarah yelled that time over Tasuga VII when the anti-grav had failed, Benny knew just what the answer would be.

'Perfectly'.

Jason stuffed the last of his clothes into his bag and wrenched the zip over the bulging contents. He'd just wrestled the fastener up to the top when he spotted his copy of *The Gwenan Enigma* on the bedside table. Sod it, he thought, I'm not undoing it all again. Pulling the table's drawer open, he swept the novel inside. It thumped on top of the hotel-issue Bible and he slammed the drawer shut, wondering mischievously which book would give the greatest spiritual enlightenment to the room's next occupant.

'Ready to go?' Benny wandered up to Jason and kissed him lightly on the lips. She had already warned him that he should use this tongue more carefully than the last one – which was open to several interpretations – but he wasn't ready for more intimate snogs just yet. The clone graft was still healing and he didn't much fancy pulling away from the woman he loved to find his tongue was still in her mouth.

The door sensor chimed brightly. Benny pushed the lock release to

find Simon Kyle framed in the doorway, uniform pressed and polished, a wry smile on his face.

‘Just popped in to say goodbye.’

‘I’m glad you did,’ Benny replied. She hugged him, then gestured him to a senso-chair. This time, Kyle sat in it. ‘We haven’t really talked about what happened.’

‘Before we do,’ Kyle said, reaching into an inside pocket, ‘I have to give you this.’ He passed her an envelope. Benny’s fingers registered the thickness of the paper – good quality, expensive. ‘It’s an invitation.’

Benny broke into a grin. ‘Vala’s wedding?’

‘Her people gave her the all-clear now that Ivo’s name’s no longer mud. She’s having the ceremony here.’

‘On Balgoris?’

‘Penthouse suite of the Imperial.’

‘We’ll do our best to be here,’ Benny promised.

Kyle settled back in the seat. The massagers hummed busily ‘So what did you want to talk about?’

Benny perched on the edge of the seat opposite. ‘I’ve been thinking about the Mim. You know Jason was out that way a while ago, in their home system?’

‘That’s Draconian space, isn’t it?’ He looked with amusement at the surprise on Benny’s face. ‘I had one of my men do some research on the Mim. I don’t intend to get caught flat-footed again.’

‘The Draconians have been trying to annex the Collection for a while.’ Benny continued. ‘Jason fiddled a transmitter out in Mim space to help slow things down a bit.’

Kyle sucked his teeth. ‘And now the Mim try to kill you and disgrace the Collection. Make it political.’

‘Jason and I have a mission to get back to. Something big’s coming, Simon. I think we’re going to have to call on our friends sometime soon.’

He nodded curtly, ever the professional. ‘I’ll look into it, pull some strings,’ he said. ‘You don’t get to where I am without people owing you a few favours.’ He leaned forward and took Benny’s hands. ‘I know you’ve not been able to count on me in the past. I want you to know that you can now.’

‘Thank you,’ Benny replied. ‘That means a lot.’

Simon got to his feet ‘Right. Better be off. I’m stuck supervising the base construction now that... now that I’m in charge.’ He leaned in and kissed Benny on the cheek. ‘Stay in touch.’

‘You, too.’

Kyle stepped into the lift and pressed the button for the lobby. The

doors hummed closed, then jolted to a halt and reopened.

‘Hold on!’

Jason hopped into the elevator car and stabbed a finger at the button to reclose the doors. ‘Glad I caught you,’ he breezed, ignoring the look of irritation on Kyle’s face. ‘Wanted to show you something.’

He pulled a datapad from his jacket. The screen flared and a three-dimensional representation of the clearing where Ivo died appeared in miniature. ‘Have a look at this.’

He felt Kyle tense, almost imperceptibly, as the Admiral realised what he was watching.

On the holo-replay, soldiers moved through the clearing and the trees around it, scanning the ground, Jason twisted a dial and the focus changed, zooming in past the treeline, to where a soldier was walking alone. Kyle.

‘Took this from the recordings on the scanners I set up just before the Mim... you know.’ Jason stuck his tongue out and mimed hoiking it away. ‘Oh, didn’t you know the recorders were still running when you turned up?’

Kyle watched in silence. On the datapad, the recorded version of himself stopped, looked down into the undergrowth.

‘Ooh, watch this!’ Jason exclaimed. ‘This is the good bit.’

On the screen, Kyle paused, gaze fixed on something in the undergrowth. Then, looking up again, he walked on.

‘Did you get that?’ Jason asked. ‘Now, if I just forward things on a bit to... here!’

About six minutes had passed in the recording. Now another soldier was walking past the area recently trodden by Kyle. He stopped, bent out of sight for a second, then reappeared upright, shouting and waving his arms.

‘And that’s the moment your man found me,’ Jason commented, his voice suddenly hard. ‘Six and a half minutes after you found me and left me to die.’

Jason killed the power to the pad. ‘Any thoughts?’

‘She’s better off without you,’ Kyle said. ‘You’ve caused her nothing but pain since you married her.’

‘Oh, and you’ve been all sunshine and flowers for her, right?’

‘I won’t stand by and let you ruin her life, Kane.’

Jason turned to face Kyle, flat-handing him against the lift wall.

‘No, that’s exactly what you will do, Admiral. If Benny wants me in her life, that’s her decision, not yours. So let me tell you what you’re going to do. When this lift reaches the lobby, you’re going to walk out of it and go back to whatever sad Spacefleet compound you call home. And you’re going to stay there. Because if I hear you’ve contacted Benny in any shape, way or form, I’m going to show her this

recording. Am I making myself heard here, Mr Kyle?’

Kyle swallowed. ‘You can’t make me do that. I’ve already spent fifty years without her...’

‘Then the next twenty or so should be a doddle, shouldn’t they?’

Edging forward, Jason put his face right into Kyle’s. ‘Stay away from her.’

Jason stepped back and reached out to the lift’s control panel, signalling it to stop at the next floor. ‘I’ll just get off here,’ he said.

‘Don’t want to get dragged all the way down with you.’

The doors hissed apart and Jason stepped out, heading off down the corridor, not looking back. Kyle watched him until he turned a corner and vanished from sight.

Then, as the lift doors hummed closed, Admiral Simon Kyle closed his eyes and waited for the drop.



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